Commentary: Negotiating a New Millennium? Prospects for African Conflict Resolution

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The disastrous US and UN interventions in Somalia provoked an equally unhappy failure to intervene in Rwanda. This, in turn, has now produced a reassessment of the role of the United Nations and the international community in the resolution of internal crises. A number of writers have turned to the insights of writing on conflict resolution to seek remedies for the inadequacies of development theory and international relations. Although this new interest has its own problems, not least because states tend to make little use of conflict analysis once crises ensue, it has sought strategies that do not depend on 'quick fix' military strikes. In the process, it has advanced an important debate about the need for local and national initiatives and institutions in resolving conflicts and about the issue of collective intervention for humanitarian purposes.

The challenge of intra-state war in general and the impact of two massively violent civil wars in Africa have called into question assumptions about the processes of peacekeeping, peacemaking and peace-building which the UN Secretary General had so confidently proclaimed to be achievable objectives of a post cold war United Nations system (Boutros Ghali, 1992). At the same time they have provoked a fresh consideration of thinking about humanitarian intervention and related questions of modalities of conflict management and resolution.

In Somalia, UN/US intervention in the civil war, initiated in December 1992 with high hopes of saving millions from starvation and restoring peace and stability, ended ignominiously in the killing of 25 Pakistani peacekeepers on 6 June 1993, and 18 Americans in October 1993. President Clinton soon announced the withdrawal of US forces from Somalia and the complete withdrawal of UN peacekeeping troops to be affected by March 1995, with few of the mandate objectives of UNOSOM II achieved. Over 130 peacekeepers had died in Somalia during the three year intervention between 1992 and 1995, the highest fatality rate recorded in the history of UN peacekeeping. The episode resulted in a revision of US attitudes to peacekeeping, expressed in Presidential Decision Directive 25 (PDD 25) of May 1994, which was seen by many to rule out an US role in future crises unless clear US national interests were at stake and unless a limited and clear objective and exit was identified.

The first effects of this change were felt in Rwanda. While in Somalia the UN came under criticism for intervening too much militarily, in Rwanda it came under attack
for not intervening enough. In April 1994, following the killing of 10 Belgian soldiers serving with UNAMIR, the force was reduced to a small staff of 270 just when the genocide of Tutsi and moderate Hutu was taking place. Between 28 and 29 April over 250,000 Rwandan refugees had flooded into Tanzania in 24 hours, the largest and fastest exodus ever witnessed by the UNHCR. UNAMIR remained in Rwanda after the Tutsi-led RPF took power and was mandated to assist both the Rwandan government and UNHCR with the safe and voluntary return of an estimated two million refugees hosted by neighbouring countries. The UN peacekeepers in Rwanda, 5,500 strong at their peak, came under severe criticism by the RPF for failing to prevent the genocide in 1994; and after the RPF took power they were equally criticised for not preventing alleged massacres, by the Tutsi dominated army, of Hutu refugees. UNAMIR was withdrawn in March 1996 with the vast majority of Rwandan refugees still displaced.

Re-evaluating Intervention

Events such as these have prompted a questioning and re-evaluation of Boutros Ghali's Agenda for Peace. The United States Institute for Peace sponsored a seminar, the proceedings of which were published in 1995 as African Conflict Resolution: The US Role in Peacemaking, edited by David Smock and Chester Crocker. In 1996, Mats Berdal critically reviewed recent work on the UN. In 1994, Joanna Macrae and Anthony Zwi edited a volume entitled War and Hunger: Rethinking International Responses to Complex Emergencies. And this year Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, in Humanitarian Intervention in Contemporary Conflict have made the case for a new conceptualisation of humanitarian intervention which involves strengthening both the idea and institutions of international community and the accountability of those agencies which act in its name. In all these works, there is an emerging debate in which theoretical and practical insights drawn from conflict analysis and resolution can be seen to add understandings and perspectives missing from both development studies and international relations.

Smock and Crocker acknowledge the impact which the experience in Somalia had on US policy makers, leading to a mood of 'Afro-pessimism' and 'conflict fatigue'. While accepting that combat intervention through Chapter VII enforcement mandates of the UN is not a desirable form of conflict resolution, the book argued against US disengagement and in favour of encouraging 'layered responses' to African conflicts, where local and national organisations respond initially, followed by responses at the sub-national and regional levels and ultimately at the level of the broader international community (p.105). The intention is, then, to encourage African initiatives, to encourage African solutions to African conflicts, and to provide sustained international and particularly US support for such initiatives. The Kampala Declaration which emerged from the African Leadership Forum of 1991 called for a conference on Security, Stability Development, and Co-operation in Africa (CSSDCA). The OAU summit of 1993 approved an OAU mechanism for preventing, managing and resolving conflicts with a mandate to concern itself with internal conflicts or civil wars. The UNDP has advocated establishing an African Peace Fund to assist the OAU to realise some of its new peacemaking and peacekeeping ambitions, and the 1994 African Conflict Resolution Act of the US Congress authorised $1.5 million annually between 1995 and 1998 to support the OAU conflict resolution programme.

There are limitations to all this, most obviously in the minimal operational capability of the OAU. As Cohen pointed out in his chapter in African Conflict Resolution
African Capabilities for Managing Conflict', pp. 77-94), just when the OAU has undertaken a responsibility to concern itself with internal civil war, the greatest challenge of all for conflict resolution it has severe problems with a still rudimentary organisation and a lack of personnel. The emergence of an indigenous capability for conflict resolution which is supported by all contributors to the book, provides some reasons for optimism, though this must be prudently set against the nature and severity of the political, social, and economic problems facing Africa and identified, for example, in Bush and Szeftel's 'Commentary: Taking Leave of the Twentieth Century' (ROAPE 65, 1995). Quoting Leys, they pointed out that of the total population of 500 million, nearly 300 million are living in absolute poverty and that the literature on which they commented underscored 'Africa's growing marginalisation within the world order, and its poor prospects for the next century'.

A general global crisis marked by uncertainty and insecurity impacts with particular severity on Africa:

In Africa too the crisis has been most severe where economic hardship has combined with the activation of communal sentiments to influence the distribution of meagre resources through political muscle. At its worst, the process has devoured the state and even produced genocidal conflicts, as in Somalia and Rwanda ... Universal values of citizenship and secular democracy, social justice and equality of entitlement, are in retreat and under attack by the forces of particularism, exclusivity, privilege and prejudice (ROAPE 65, 1995:292).

The scale of the problem is a sobering consideration in assessing the relevance and capability of conflict resolution policies in African contexts. A salutary warning is sounded in the conclusion to War and Hunger: structural forces, such as predatory economic strategies, maldevelopment and the inequitable distribution of resources, which generate and feed the spiral of violence, need to be addressed by structural changes. Humanitarian assistance to sustain those displaced from their homes is a limited and problematic response and one which must be informed by a re-evaluation of the causes of conflict and the role of the international community in sustaining it' (p. 232). Such an exercise in turn 'touches at the heart of international relations and the current economic order' (ibid.). Clearly, the act of intervention in conflict-related disasters has the effect of impacting on structural forces: Duffield (in chapter 3 of War and Hunger) makes the crucial point that during the 1980s Africa became the largest recipient of food aid and humanitarian assistance and NGOs became the main agencies of delivering and managing this aid, to the extent that 'in net terms, NGOs now collectively transfer more resources to the South than the World Bank' (p. 58). They are therefore central to the process of negotiation and re-negotiation of the structure of post-cold war North–South relations. Given this influence the evidence of a new interest among NGOs in conflict resolution theory and practice is encouraging and timely.

The question of the state of conflict theory and its relevance to practice is raised in a review by Mats Berdal of recent research on the UN, The United Nations in International Relations (1996:95-106). In a section of his review entitled 'Conflict studies, the UN, and international security', Berdal covers work emanating from Australia which is significant because it seeks to apply 'many of the concepts and insights offered by behaviouralist inspired conflict research in International Relations, especially with regard to conflict resolution and management techniques' (p. 96). Much of this work itself relates to approaches to peace research, conflict theory, and conflict resolution which originated in the mid-1950s and which is associated with writers like Galtung, Boulding, Curle, Mitchell, Burton, Azar, Groom, Banks, de Reuck and others, and
which sought to provide explanations of conflict which were not available in the conventional international relations literature.

Very much within this tradition, Kevin Clements and Robin Ward's *Building International Community* aimed to explain 'the current inability of the United Nations to respond adequately to the diverse crises before the international community', a failure based on the 'failure of old conceptual frameworks to guide timely analysis and effective multilateral intervention' (Berdal 1996:96, quoting Clements and Ward). For Berdal, however, it is not so much the old conceptual frameworks which have failed; rather, the central assumptions of conflict research are questionable. According to Berdal these are, first, an assumption of an underlying harmony of human interests and, second, a belief in the power of reason to 'promote right conduct'. In fact it is not at all certain that this would be accepted as an accurate representation of underlying assumptions by scholars working in this tradition: in the first place, new conflict theorists stress the role of needs, not interests; and second they have tended to use perspectives from social and inter-group psychology to demonstrate the powerful play of irrational behaviour in conflict escalation in a way not understood in the rational choice stances of realist thinking. In so far as there is an assumption of an underlying harmony, it is argued by the new conflict theorists that any such harmony has to be constructed through discourse and negotiation, with or without third party assistance, rather than existing as a natural condition or relationship.

Leaving these reservations aside, however, Berdal does point out the way in which the case studies in Clements and Ward demonstrate the gap between expectations from theory and realities on the ground. Thus he argues that the conflict in former Yugoslavia was escalated through the divergent interests of European states and the power ambitions of leaders such as Tudjman and Milosevic, and that there was little evidence of the use of sophisticated conflict analysis by any of the major powers. Yet he also sees that it was precisely a failure to recognise or to understand the need for persistent dialogue and negotiation which was, at least in part, the reason for the debacle in Somalia. In March 1993 the Security Council approved a mandate for UNOSOM II which was breathtaking in its ambition, seeking to assist 'the Somali people in rebuilding their shattered economy and social and political life, re-establishing the country’s constitutional structure; achieving national reconciliation, [and] creating a Somali State based on democratic governance' (1996:99). As Berdal points out such objectives could only have been achieved by working impartially with the Somali people and where negotiation skills would need to predominate over military ones. In the event UNOSOM II got dragged into a war against Aidid’s Somali National Alliance and ended up killing a large number of Somali’s in the cross-fire.

The critical review by Berdal provides a healthy questioning of the shortcomings of conflict analysis, or at least of the reluctance of conflict actors to follow its futilings! It is clearly the case that intentions of putting in place conflict management and resolution mechanisms, whether in Africa or anywhere else, must be informed and guided by realistic assessments of what kind of management or resolution is possible. This evaluation must in turn be conducted in the context of a wider debate about principles which guide intervention in conflicts.

**War, Hunger, and International Policy**

An important concern in considering policy for conflict resolution mechanisms relates to the idea of ‘layered’ responses raised in *African Conflict Resolution* where,
correctly, local and national initiatives are to be supported as the first level of response to conflict before regional and (only in extremis) international intervention follows. The danger inherent in institution-building for conflict resolution is that the process may be over-influenced by ideas emanating from military and security policy and that membership of the 'layers' will be confined to, or dominated by, elites. At issue here is the question of agency: who are the subjects and who the objects of conflict managing institutions? *War and Hunger* sets out to 'make a modest contribution to ... debates on war, hunger and international policy' (p. 2) and to suggest that it is no longer tenable to examine problems of conflict, economic decline and famine as separate phenomena. It is worth noting that peace research and its use of conflict theory developed from just such a realisation.

Adam Curle, the first professor of Peace Studies in the UK, moved from development policy consultancy to conflict resolution when he witnessed in the 1960s and 1970s conflicts in Africa and in Asia which destroyed the fruits of development. Focusing on Africa, the achievement of *War and Hunger* is far from modest, calling for 'the development of an appropriate discourse on the nature of contemporary conflicts ... (as) a precondition for improving the effectiveness of international assistance and developing new strategies of conflict prevention and resolution'. Lessons learned from the experience of development policy and international aid programmes are salutary ones for those concerned with promoting new layers and mechanisms for conflict resolution. In the conclusion to the book, Duffield, Macrae and Zwi, in pointing to the need for greater accountability in international public action related to disbursing relief and development assistance, make a number of points which are as relevant to conflict resolvers as they are to development workers: development programmes should include an awareness of the need to support public and private institutions capable of managing conflict; criteria for humanitarian intervention should be based on the needs of conflict-affected communities; and conflict affected communities, especially the most vulnerable (a chapter of the book deals with gender and the impact of war on women and families) should be given a voice in determining 'international action to prevent, mitigate and resolve structural and political violence' (p. 231).

Greater accountability in international public action in turn raises the question of humanitarian intervention. A significant development in the emergence of a broader concept of intervention came with UN SCR 688 of 5 April 1991, which provided protection and humanitarian relief for Kurdish refugees in northern Iraq through Operation Provide Comfort. As for Africa, Alex de Waal (*War and Hunger*, 'Dangerous Precedents? Famine Relief in Somalia 1991-1993') described the political, institutional and media pressures which led to the deployment of the Unified Task Force (UNITAF) in December 1992, 'the first modern case of the military occupation of a country for avowedly humanitarian reasons alone'; UNOSOM II, deployed from May 1993, was 'the first use of forces under Chapter VII of the UN Charter which allows for the use of force to make peace'. The result was that 'Somalia thus became an experiment, an international test-tube in which the instruments of the new world order could be tried out' (p. 155).

If the experiment is to be continued, Africa is likely to be one of its great laboratories. A CIA report cited by Smock in *African Conflict Resolution* claimed that ethnic conflict, civil war and natural disasters would combine to place a greater demand on humanitarian support in sub-Saharan Africa than at any time since the 1960s. Indeed in a later chapter in the book Herman Cohen, amongst a set of proposals for a
partnership for conflict management in Africa involving African and international commitments, suggests that it may be desirable to make Africa a ‘pilot region’ for applying Boutros Ghali’s Agenda for Peace. Such comprehensive intervention is unlikely in the extreme, but the case for some regime of humanitarian support is plain, both because of humanitarian need (measured by the suffering caused by conflict related emergencies) and because the UN will be reduced to the role of powerless on-looker, unable to effect even the most basic standards of humanitarian law, unless some basis for effective international control is agreed.

Of course basic principles of the international order are affected here, most importantly the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. There seems to be some willingness to breach the non-intervention principle, either by UN directed intervention in crises in pursuit of humanitarian objectives, or by regional groupings taking action to control conflict and instability. Thus Ali Mazrui argued before a meeting of the Foundation for Global Dialogue in South Africa that one option for ensuring peace in the next century was to accept that:

some African countries will simply need to be controlled by other African countries ....
Inevitably some dysfunctional countries will need to submit to trusteeship and even tutelage for a while.

He proposed the formation of an African Security Council composed of five pivotal regional states (International Peacekeeping News, 1, 11, 1995:2) (Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa and Zaire) which would, presumably, provide the capability for such interventions.

Re-evaluating Humanitarian Intervention

While the UN has not developed an effective means of intervening in intra-state conflicts, there have been important shifts in the concept and practice of humanitarian intervention in post-cold war conflicts. The nature of this shift was examined by Ramsbotham and Woodhouse (1996). We suggested that since the end of the cold war the context for humanitarian intervention has changed. During the cold war period the threat to human rights was seen to come from tyrannical governments and, in the absence of the possibility of collective intervention by regional organisations or the United Nations, intervention was usually understood to involve forcible action by states. We identified a set of developments which have moved the debate on agency and method of humanitarian intervention forward. Instead of self-help by states it is now a matter of collective response through the United Nations; instead of forcible intervention, it is now a question of understanding how best to combine non-forcible military options (peacekeeping) with non-military options (the work of NGOs in humanitarian assistance) in responding to conflict related humanitarian crises. We therefore suggest a broader concept of humanitarian intervention ranging from military enforcement, through to a set of non-forcible options for intervention. The new mood underpinning this evolution was well-expressed by the out-going UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar in 1991:

It is now increasingly felt that the principle of interference within the essential domestic jurisdiction of states cannot be regarded as a protective barrier behind which human rights could be massively or systematically violated with impunity (Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, p. 84).
There are of course serious and well-founded objections from countries of the South about a carte blanche that this thinking will bestow on a programme of ‘interventionary humanitarianism’: that the non-intervention principle will be too easily breached by powerful states against weaker ones; and that the palliative of humanitarian relief and stopgap peacekeeping will take the place of long term development and the correction of structural imbalances between North and South. The ambivalence for Africa was clearly marked in the OAU’s Declaration on the establishment of a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution which recognised i) that with its burdensome debt and economic problems Africa was not in a position to undertake a regional initiative to restore peace in Somalia, but that ii) ‘Africa believes that regional actors, with a better understanding of local and regional issues, are better placed to handle local conflicts than more distant participants’ (Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, p. 164). The central challenge, and this is where we come back to the policy relevance of academic work in conflict resolution, was identified by Trachtenberg: in the turbulence and suffering of contemporary conflicts, western readiness to intervene in defence of ‘civilised’ values must now be extended to a determination by the international community to uphold truly universal standards. The key element here is legitimacy:

For an interventionist system to be viable, it needs in particular to have a general aura of legitimacy. In the case of intervention in the Third World, the system needs to be supported especially by the major Third World countries that can be expected to be very suspicious of it. This means more than just solving the tactical problems of getting Third World governments to vote for interventionist actions in the UN and various regional bodies, or even to send their own military contingents. It means figuring out how whole populations, or at least their politically active components, react to intervention – what excites hostility, which aspects of an interventionary policy can generate support – and then framing one’s policy with this understanding in mind. It means listening to people we are not used to listening to, and understanding the limits on our own power and, especially, on our own wisdom (Trachtenberg in Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, p. 164)

One outcome of this kind of reflection is the realisation that violent civil wars are not amenable to quick fix solutions or to surgical strikes by military forces. In the case of former Yugoslavia, the DGIA of the European Union has judged that conflict resolution there involves long term tasks; that military stabilisation taking 1-2 years will need to be paralleled by a process of infrastructural reconstruction (taking ten years); and by a process of reconciliation taking more than a generation. Another consequence is to find ways and means of ‘listening to people we are not used to listening to’, which is one area of expertise that conflict resolution can make a claim to.

Conflict Resolution and Civil Society

In concluding this commentary it is important to make some remarks about conflict theory and what it contributes to the discourse which Macrae and Zwi have called for on the nature of contemporary conflict. The term conflict resolution was coined in the 1950s by Kenneth Boulding, who founded the Journal of Conflict Resolution. Boulding defined the term as having two components: the analytic and descriptive study of conflict, and the normative element of positive conflict management (the theory and practice of peaceful resolution). While there is not space here to comment in detail, some comment on the core characteristics of conflict resolution is appropriate. There has been, since Boulding first launched his journal in 1957, a steady growth in the literature and there is now a base of knowledge which, though still in need of
development, is capable of guiding policy at a variety of levels of conflict. The momentum for the development of this work came from the realisation that deep-rooted and protracted social conflicts were resistant to resolution by conventional forms of power-political intervention (whether based on military or other forms of coercion). The most fruitful research now suggests that conflict resolution needs to be based on multilateral and multicultural inputs. In other words conflict resolution is not only a process of traditional power-mediation but should be a multilateral approach capable of mobilising a range of intervention strategies from peacemaking to problem-solving workshops. Implicit in this multilateral approach is the need to combine resolution initiatives capable of tackling political-structural levels of conflict ('objective' conflict); and social-cultural levels ('subjective' conflict). Structural conflict is defined as an outcome of incompatible interests based on competition for scarce resources; it is objective because it is defined as largely independent of the perception of participants and emanates from power structures and institutions which are historically formed and determined. The structural approach to conflict management is aimed at changing institutions and power relations in the political arena. Cultural approaches to conflict resolution involve attempts to improve the ways in which distinct communal groups understand and behave towards each other.

Two attitudes to the perspectives of conflict resolution should be noted. On the one hand, it suffers to some extent from naïve advocates who think it capable of curing almost every human ailment. On the other hand, it is regarded sceptically by others who see both its analyses and prescriptions for action as simplistic. One critique commonly heard from this school is that conflict resolution ignores or underestimates the power of economic and political forces and social structures to determine and coerce human action and behaviour. Conflict resolution programmes based on communication, dialogue, third party activity, problem solving etc. are weak instruments in the face of such objective and structural forces, it is alleged.

In between the magic wand wavers and the sceptics are those who see conflict resolution as a useful resource of theory and practice which, along with many other bases of knowledge, can help to empower conflict affected, or potentially affected, communities to negotiate and construct good governance for themselves. It can provide part of the mechanism by which the voices of communities are heard by interveners in the process of building international accountability. The implication of the formula of African solutions to African conflicts is the need to create a role for civil society in the management of conflict and to cultivate a political culture in which leaders are open to inputs from civil society. In African Conflict Resolution, Zartman claimed that very few Africans 'study, teach, analyse, or write on the various aspects of conflict management, reduction, resolution, and prevention' (p.103) and while there are significant exceptions it is probably the case that the capability in higher education in Africa to contribute to a political culture informed by these perspectives is weak. Part of a long term strategy for institution building for conflict management would need to be the development of a conflict resolution curricula and research agenda in African universities.

The conflict resolution research community in general has positioned itself around a research and training agenda which is not as dependent on western designed concepts and practices as it has been. The analysis of conflict at two levels (structural-institutional and cultural-communal) and the more flexible conception of the range of appropriate intervention strategies in turn has implications for the way in which the role of culture is understood in conflict resolution. Kevin Avruch and Peter Black
(1987) have argued for the need to open conflict resolution to a more sophisticated intercultural and multicultural understanding. They pointed to the need for ethno conflict theories (derived from locally constructed common sense views of conflict), and for ethno praxis (techniques and customs for dealing with conflict which emanate from these understandings).

Prompted by experiences in Somalia, US officials at a meeting in Nairobi in January 1996 announced a new strategy on African conflict management and prevention, with the ten countries of the Greater Horn region intended as its testing ground. In addition to using eminent persons as mediators the strategy relies upon ‘substantially adopting a lot of the efforts being made at the local level’; relying on the knowledge of village elders; and teaching children ‘how to get along with people from different ethnic groups, people with different opinions and other differences’ (International Peacekeeping News, April 1996). Certainly this is an advance on putting peacekeepers into positions where they are shooting at Somali’s in pursuit of a mandate of national reconciliation. A little while after this strategy was announced the UN launched a $25 billion initiative, the ‘UN System-Wide Special Initiative on Africa’, designed to revive development on the continent by putting funding into education, water supplies and health projects over the next decade. It would be interesting to question how much officials responsible for both of these initiatives have spoken to each other and how much of the funding initiative will be devoted to a radical strengthening of conflict resolution capability in Africa.

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Bibliography


