

MERCY CORPS
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT GROUP
SECTOR OVERVIEW
2009



Photo: Jenny Vaughan/Mercy Corps

INTRODUCTION

Mercy Corps works almost exclusively in high-risk conflict and post-conflict environments. We currently have programs in more than 40 countries; the vast majority of these (73%) fall into the category of fragile or critically weak states. In addition, over 92% of the places where we work are considered to be at a high or moderately high risk of instability.¹ While we recognize that these are difficult places to operate, we believe that transitional environments – countries affected by civil wars, economic and political crisis, or natural disasters – also offer tremendous opportunities for positive change.

Violent conflict takes a terrible toll on developing countries. It destroys infrastructure, disrupts trade, distorts markets and can reverse decades of development. Conflict-affected nations suffer severe refugee crises and population loss. There are now around 26 million internally displaced persons and over 42 million refugees worldwide, most of whom are fleeing from violence.² Generations of children have grown up believing that violence is the only way to find a job, to find meaning or to simply stay alive. These destabilizing elements combine to create 'conflict-traps' that keep countries in cycles of violence for decades."³

Helping people find ways to break the cycle of violence and promote peaceful change is at the heart of Mercy Corps' mandate. We believe that – given the right tools, skills and support – people are eager to understand the complex tensions and challenges they face and to address them in a way that promotes both peace and development. We currently implement 34 peacebuilding programs in some of the world's toughest places, including Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, and Nepal. Our current work builds on an exceptionally strong historical foundation. Since the late 1990s, Mercy Corps has implemented over 95 peacebuilding programs in over 30 countries and regions, making Mercy Corps a true leader in the field.

¹ These figures are drawn from Susan E. Rice and Stewart Patrick, *Index of State Weakness in the Developing World*, Brookings Institution, 2008. Hewitt, Wilkenfeld, and Gurr, *Peace and Conflict 2008*, Center for International Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland, 2008.

² UNHCR *Refugee Statistics*, Annual Report, 2008.

³ Collier, et al. *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, World Bank and Oxford University Press, 2003.

MERCY CORPS' APPROACH TO PEACEFUL CHANGE

Conflict Management Sector Goal

Our goal is to provide people in conflict and post-conflict societies with the tools, skills and support they need to peacefully manage and address the issues that lead to violence.

Approach Framework

Our approach to peacebuilding is built on three core foundations. First, we work with local leaders and communities to help them gain the tools and skills they need to re-establish trust, rebuild relationships and talk about the difficult issues that have led to violence. Second, we help our local partners implement development programs that address the underlying issues that are fuelling violence, whether competition over access to land or water, youth unemployment and alienation, or political and economic discrimination. Third, we actively seek to measure the impact of our programs, learn which approaches work (and which do not) and disseminate our findings to the broader development and policy community.

1. **Promoting Dialogue and Rebuilding Relationships:** Violence destroys trust and disrupts relationships. Mercy Corps helps local actors restart dialogue and rebuild trust by strengthening their negotiation and reconciliation skills and by providing a safe, neutral space for former adversaries to begin dialogue.
2. **Addressing Causes of Conflict:** Many of the most important causes of violence are related to under-development, including deep poverty, youth unemployment and alienation, poor governance and competition over natural resources. Mercy Corps' approach to peacebuilding integrates development interventions into our peacebuilding work, in order to address these causes.
3. **Impact and Advocacy:** Rigorous monitoring and evaluation helps Mercy Corps to continually improve peacebuilding interventions and demonstrate the impact of conflict management activities to policy makers and peer agencies.

PROMOTING DIALOGUE AND REBUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Communication and consensus-building skills are often the first casualties of conflict. Violence breeds tension and mistrust. It shatters long-standing relationships and leads to a zero-sum, winner take all mentality, which makes cooperation extremely difficult. People who have lived through violence are enormously resilient, but many also struggle with how to forgive neighbors who have done terrible things or how to return home and live a normal life after they have participated in violence. Mercy Corps helps people in divided societies rebuild relationships and trust by providing former adversaries with a safe space to interact, learn new negotiation and reconciliation skills, and build (or rebuild) formal and informal relationships and trust. Our approach is based on the belief that most people and communities, particularly those who have experienced violence, ultimately prefer to resolve conflicts peacefully, and will do so if they are given the opportunity to come together and identify their common interests.

ADDRESSING CAUSES OF CONFLICT

Dialogue is an important first step, but it is rarely enough on its own. The second key component of our peacebuilding work is to help local communities develop and implement programs that address the underlying causes of violence they identify through dialogue. Most of the issues that fuel violence are at the heart of development assistance, whether this is poverty and unequal access to economic development, competition over natural resources, political discrimination or youth alienation and unemployment. The vast majority of our peacebuilding programs therefore, have a strong development component. However, they differ from traditional development programs in that the ultimate goal of the assistance is to promote **both** development and conflict management objectives. Our work falls into several key areas: economic growth, natural resource management, youth engagement, and local governance.

Economic Growth and Conflict

Poverty puts countries at significant risk of conflict. Research has shown that low per capita income and slow economic growth drastically increase the chances that a country will experience violence. The relationship between poverty and conflict works in the opposite direction as well, with conflict reversing economic growth. Many of our peacebuilding programs seek to address the underlying causes of conflict through economic development programs that reduce competition for scarce resources, provide alternative livelihoods and increase government capacity to promote equitable economic growth. We also focus on rebuilding economic relationships between communities that have been torn apart by violence.

Natural Resource Management

In many parts of the developing world, deep poverty combined with drought and environmental degradation can lead to fierce competition over scarce natural resources, such as land, water or timber. In addition, many livelihoods are based on environmentally damaging practices, such as over-grazing or charcoal production, that further erode already degraded natural resources. To address these issues, Mercy Corps works with local communities in local and regional resource management and to improve resource dispute resolution methods.

Youth Engagement

Young people have so much promise. Their energy and creativity is absolutely essential to helping their communities become more secure, productive and peaceful places. However, a large number of unemployed, alienated young people can also be a significant risk factor for violence. To ensure that young people do not fall prey to violent groups, Mercy Corps designs and implements holistic programs that address the multitude of reasons youth participate in violence—a sense of helplessness, lack of economic opportunities, exclusion from political processes and a lack of belonging.

Local Governance

In fragile states, governments are either unable or unwilling to provide basic services or security to significant portions of their population. In this context, deeply impoverished and insecure communities can be susceptible to the appeals of powerful (often violent or criminal) non-state actors. Many of our conflict management programs are intended to build partnerships between citizens and local government around development projects in order to help improve perceptions of government effectiveness and build (or re-build) trust.

IMPACT AND ADVOCACY

Effective programming must be based upon a clear understanding of the causal mechanisms behind peaceful change and a rigorous analysis of the impact of different approaches. As a relatively young discipline, the field of conflict management is still struggling to determine the best way to define goals and objectives, to articulate theories of change that describe why a particular intervention will lead to its expected outcome, to measure impact and, ultimately, to identify success.

Our emphasis on measuring impact is also driven by the desire to make a positive contribution to key foreign policy debates on conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. In countless parts of the world, such as Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan and Colombia, we struggle with how to promote stability, reduce the appeal of extremists and safeguard U.S. security. However, we have very little evidence about which types of interventions lead to a reduction in violence or instability. We think that the most important contribution we can make to policy debate is to continue to push the boundaries of conflict programming and develop a more rigorous, evidence-based understanding of what types of programs promote stability and at what cost.

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GLOBAL HEADQUARTERS

45 SW Ankeny Street
Portland, OR 97204
+1 800.292.3355

www.mercycorps.org



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