“Can jobs programs build peace?” New paper highlights the need to strengthen evidence in development aid spending.

“Can jobs programs build peace?” has been published in the peer-reviewed journal “World Bank Research Observer”. This review of why jobs programs might build peace and whether or not they do is the result of collaboration between ISDC and Valeria Izzi, with support from ILO, PBSO, UNDP and the World Bank. The article highlights strong social science theories that link employment programs and peace but scant real world evidence that programs have successfully delivered this promise. Until such a link and its mechanisms can be robustly established, simply running good jobs programs in the difficult situations that require peacebuilding probably makes more sense.

Summary

The World Bank Research Observer, a peer-reviewed academic journal, has published a new research article on whether or not development interventions in the form of jobs programming can contribute to social stability and build peace.

Neil Ferguson, Tilman Brück, and Wolfgang Stojetz of ISDC in Berlin, along with Valeria Izzi, highlight that while the social sciences provide good theoretical reasons to believe that jobs programs and aspects of peace and stability should be linked, the key relationships at play have not been observed in the real world. Rather, potentially because of the strength of these theories, jobs programming is simply hoped, or assumed, to contribute to these wider social phenomena. In the real world, it is insufficiently understood how jobs and jobs programs contribute to peacebuilding. This does not mean that jobs programs do not contribute to peace and certainly does not mean that such programs make matters worse. At the same time, it calls into question the validity of attempting to target these two aims with a single input. Given the sums spent - estimated by the researchers at well over $10bn in the decade from 2005 - this suggests a lot of money is being thrown after a hope. Until key relationships and the mechanisms behind them can be observed, it probably makes more sense to either focus on running good employment programs and not worrying about their external impacts or on building peace through other more established processes.

Dr Neil T. N. Ferguson, a Senior Researcher at ISDC and the corresponding author of the article, comments: “Trying to build peace before conflict, as well as after it, makes sense. There’s lots to gain from avoiding violence ever onsetting and that is where programs like those involving jobs, training and employment come into the picture. It’s a very hopeful idea, too. Unfortunately we don’t find any real life support for that hopeful idea. So, if you want to promote jobs and hope for other external impacts, these kinds of programs might still make sense. If you’re really focussed on building peace, it probably makes more sense to do something else, at least for now.”

Background

In the decade from 2005, well over $10bn has been spent on employment programs that serve the dual purpose of promoting employment and building peace. Despite the outlay, whether these programs actually contribute to peace...
and stability in any meaningful way remains an open question.

In an attempt to provide answers to this, the authors of this study (Neil Ferguson, Tilman Brück, Valeria Izzi and Wolfgang Stojetz) conducted a series of interlinked reviews.

First, the authors considered the explanations that the social sciences offer for why people might engage in violence or support violent actors and the reasons why jobs and jobs-related programming might interrupt those reasons. This reveals four ways in which jobs programming might help. First, it increases individuals’ opportunities (such as access to employment and income streams), which makes engagement with violent actors less appealing. Second, it promotes contact between members of different groups, which can breakdown tensions and stereotypes. Third, it can reduce grievances that relate to perceived inequalities between members of different groups. Fourth, it can reduce the experience of high levels of competition for scarce economic and non-economic resources, which if left unchecked could lead to tensions between people. This suggests that there are very good reasons to believe that jobs, jobs programming and jobs-related programming can help to alleviate tensions in complex scenarios.

Second, the authors then consider the evidence that has been produced about whether or not these strong theoretical predictions actually occur in the real world. The first surprising finding is how few studies have attempted to answer this question, not least in comparison to the amount of money that has been spent on interventions of this form. The second surprise was - particularly in the long-term - there is very little evidence that links jobs-programming to peace-related outcomes. While this suggests a failure to establish positive peace-related impacts of jobs programs, the research also established that jobs programs in complicated situations can perform well in their narrow economic welfare aims and don’t seem to worsen the tensions present in those situations. In other words, if the main aim of a programme is to build employment with the hope (but not expectation) that it might have external effects, they are a perfectly valid way to do things. If the aim is, more directly, to build peace, other types of programs seem more likely to perform better.

Third, based on a review of the programming of a number of major agencies, we find evidence that most programs are simply assumed to have had impacts on peace and stability. In part, this arises because of the strength of the theories uncovered in the first review, yet, again, what this really means is that there has been a failure to establish that the link exists in the real world. This suggests major limitations to knowledge within a popular and frequent approach to development and peacebuilding programming.

It becomes challenging to justify spending on jobs for peace programs, particularly when the central aim of the intervention is to build peace rather than employment. More broadly, this asks questions of a central theme in development aid programming, which seeks to improve complicated and difficult to measure outcomes (like peace) through programs that target some intermediate (and perhaps better understood) goal (like jobs). Attempting to kill two birds with one stone, therefore, might not be the right metaphor for more than just the most obvious of reasons.

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