

Monitoring Change in Diverse Societies: Some reflections

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These observations pick up on some points raised in the seminar of particular interest from a diversity management and conflict prevention perspective. Some tentative suggestions are made for how processes and tools for monitoring change in diverse societies might be improved and how the discourse around monitoring could potentially be advanced.

KEY QUESTIONS

Why monitor and measure change?

An underlying premise of this seminar was that the collection of quantitative and qualitative data in selected fields enables us to observe trends in progress towards desirable goals (peace, security, social cohesion, respect for diversity, sharing, etc.). In helping to identify recurring or emerging issues that (potentially) threaten those goals, monitoring can both inform and precipitate action to pre-empt and defuse potential flash points and introduce legal and policy measures to manage tensions and conflict within societies. This raises the perennial challenge of ensuring that the information not only reaches but is used by those with the competence to act and effect change, including national governments, civil society, and international actors such as the UN and regional intergovernmental organisations.

How can indexes contribute?

If an important (if not the only) goal of monitoring is to contribute to the pool of evidence that informs policy and practice, then international comparisons would seem to have a quite limited role. In terms of potentially prioritising/targeting external support or interventions or informing foreign policy, for example, global and regional indexes provide just one initial point of reference. Obviously, such decisions are (or at least should) be based on in-depth analysis, including a good conflict analysis, taking into account a whole range of factors at country level. What comparative indexes can do is to help identify core elements or common features that are integral to more peaceful societies, examine those linkages (including in terms of cause and effect) and

see how theories play out in practice. For example, is economic prosperity a precondition for peace or does peace enable economic growth? The answer is complex but probably involves a bit of both, as peace and prosperity tend to be reinforcing. Another way that indexes ranking countries according to a series of indicators, such as the Global Peace Index, can potentially be useful is as an advocacy tool in ‘naming and shaming’ those that score poorly. Peace indexes, in particular, can also be a useful resource in carrying out risk assessments for businesses or others contemplating engagement in a country or region.

On the whole though, such tools provide a broad-brush picture which needs to be filled in with more detail at national level. Even then, it is not just a question of reaching target audiences with data and analysis, but of getting them to actually use it. A better understanding of the profile of actual and potential users, in terms of who is accessing indexes and whether and how that translates into action could also inform the design, development and modification of indicator frameworks to further enhance their relevance and utility for different end-users. In this respect, the plethora of indexes relevant for monitoring change in diverse societies, using different but often overlapping indicators and data, can be regarded as an advantage in that different indexes are, or can be, more tailored to the needs of different audiences, by providing more nuanced information in different fields (economic development, rule of law, etc.).

Data reliability and gaps

To engender confidence in potential users and encourage the uptake of information, data sources must be reliable and methodologies sound. The shortcomings of statistics in terms of availability, bias and manipulation in processes of collection, presentation and interpretation are well known. Gaps and inconsistencies in available data are a particular challenge for comparative studies, where it is not possible to compare like with like, but this is also a problem for national studies. States may fail to collect data (whether deliberately or by omission) in the indicator areas most relevant for monitoring change in diverse societies. In this respect, collection of ‘ethnic’ data is a hugely contentious issue for many reasons (not least the fact that it can be used to negatively target rather than benefit certain groups). A lack of disaggregated data along ethnic, religious or other identity-related lines in policy areas crucial for building peaceful shared societies can result in a distorted representation of reality. This is one reason why it is essential that qualitative and quantitative data are integrated meaningfully in any analysis. To take one example, on a recent mission to the Russian Federation to assess freedom of movement in relation to relevant international standards, the authorities asserted that there is no discrimination against minorities in residence registration processes, based

on the fact that there have apparently been no complaints of such. However, because the system does not record complaints by ethnicity, if one group were bringing more complaints than others (which might indicate an underlying discrimination problem) this would not show up in the statistics. We know discrimination is actually occurring (or at least is perceived to be), because of the weight of evidence provided by Inter-Governmental Organisations (IGO) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO), reports based on a range of sources, including interviews with members of minority communities. So, in this – as in many similar cases – qualitative data provides the context for the statistical evidence, fills the gaps, and helps to redress skewed results.

Interpreting and balancing sources

Obviously, the weight of different forms of data needs to be balanced in any situation and the reliability of both quantitative and qualitative data has to be assessed. To continue with the discrimination example, governments often argue that perceptions of discrimination are not borne out by the facts and in some cases this may be true.¹ From a conflict prevention perspective, however, perceptions can be as important as facts if they are the source of resentment or animosity, and therefore also need to be addressed. Unfortunately interpretation of such qualitative data is not a straightforward process. The challenge of weighing the relative significance of different views and perceptions are illustrated by Grainne Kelly's tale of her Northern Ireland research, where a lone voice preoccupied with the flag issue turned out to be prescient in the light of the recent resurfacing tensions and violence around the flying of national flags. This would seem to suggest that the weighting of different views needs to take place in a broader analytical framework that also considers the conditions under which discrepant views might take on more significance.

Frequently people's own experience and understanding of a situation does not correlate with the facts on the ground. This gap between reality and perceptions is illustrated by the Peace Index monitoring trends in Israeli public opinion. As Tamar Hermann noted in her presentation, peace is not considered a high priority according to a recent survey – ranking 5th out of 7 issues – with economic problems at the fore. This may reflect the fact that there have been less outward manifestations of conflict in the form of attacks.² In terms of implications for action by national or international actors, however, this would not indicate the need for less focus on addressing the causes of conflict – which of course remains unresolved. Indeed, a period of little or no violence can potentially open up doors that are firmly closed when violence is on-going.

Diverse narratives for peace

Monitoring perceptions of current situations in conjunction with statistical data to help inform action is obviously important, but as presentations on South Africa and Northern Ireland emphasised, as part of the project to build a positive peace it is also important to record different visions for the society that people want to live in. In doing so, the aim is to identify some common ground and points of intersection, some core elements of what would constitute a peaceful Shared Society which everyone can support or at least accept. In diverse societies where competition over power and resources (having) and competing visions and ideologies of state formation (belonging) are frequently a source of conflict and violence, it is necessary to create a framework of indicators that can reflect the different and evolving narratives of different interest groups. This needs to be inclusive of all those who are present in the State, including migrants and refugees, etc. – as does any shared vision of the future. The need for inclusivity holds true for situations where there has traditionally been a conflict between one or more dominant communities and where a peace agreement and/or governance framework focuses specifically on them to the exclusion of smaller, less dominant or more recently established communities who may not have had a seat at the negotiating table.

Using indicators for peace and violence therefore involves collecting data disaggregated by interest group. We know from research that horizontal inequalities i.e. inequalities between culturally formed groups can be a source of instability³. So, for example, as already noted, it is not simply enough to record levels of economic prosperity within the State on the premise that higher rates of GDP correlate with better prospects for peace. We need data on the distribution of resources and crucially on perceptions of fairness. This means recording and understanding the declared needs, interests, goals and aspirations of members of different groups. Doing so not only helps to highlight particular current or emerging issues of concern, but also to assess the relative importance of different policy areas or issues to different constituencies (including different constituencies within so-called identity-based groups). This in turn can inform policy change and may also lead to a shift in the hierarchy or weighting of different policy areas or issues to be monitored as societies develop and situations change. For example, where a particular group does well economically but has limited access to political power, we need to know how they perceive their position and whether this is already, or potentially could be, a source of grievance and discord in society – in which case supporting political participation might become a priority area for action. Similarly, we might ask how those who are politically influential

but nevertheless do less well economically view their situation and how this affects their relationships with others.

Indexes monitoring the situation of specific groups are therefore a useful addition to the panoply of tools helpful in tracking changes in diverse societies. Examples include the Migration Migrant Integration Policy Index which collects data in 34 European countries in seven indicator areas⁴ as the basis for an interactive tool and reference guide to assess, compare and improve integration policy across a broad range of differing environments (on the understanding that this will contribute to social cohesion). The Minorities at Risk (MAR) Project similarly monitors and analyses the status and conflicts of so-called communal groups (i.e., cultural and religious minorities) around the world. The dataset contains a large number of variables that describe the status and activity of 282 such groups that are politically active across political, economic, and cultural dimensions. Information from such monitoring mechanisms focused on specific groups can be built into a broader country-level analysis.

SOME KEY CHALLENGES

Trying to identify the core elements of a peaceful shared society is not without its challenges, both in terms of designing frameworks and more broadly in terms of peacebuilding processes when narratives of the past and visions of the future espoused by different communities are fundamentally at odds with one another. As noted by Paul Nolan with regard to Northern Ireland, although it is possible to find some commonalities along the way, the end goals for the peace process according to the dominant narratives of the communities are still fundamentally different. If this is the case, then what are the implications for monitoring? Should public opinion surveys be focusing on collecting perceptions of end goals and the narratives that inform them, or should we perhaps attempt to circumvent the narrative myths and stick to factual data on issues relevant for peoples' everyday lives? The answer is probably both. In fact perhaps what is most interesting to examine is what drives the gap between perceptions and reality and how people reconcile the meta-narratives they continue to adhere to with their own experiences which might contradict that narrative. This is important because if things are actually improving on the ground (in the spheres of education, employment or personal security, for example), but a narrative of disadvantage or victimhood persists, then this needs to be addressed somehow.

When creating indexes, finding the right balance between positive and negative indicators can also be a challenge. As one participant observed, a focus on

security can sometimes be useful as it is not so value-laden. Experience of the NI Life and Times Survey in carrying out longitudinal research studies also illustrates the need to regularly review and revise indicators as situations evolve to ensure they are as responsive to, and reflective of, the current situation as possible. For example, feedback from survey participants indicated that some wanted more emphasis on negative elements such as crime, which were of particular relevance to them in their everyday lives. This would tend to support an argument for focusing on the practical and specific as a key element in monitoring change.

Another question that arises in Northern Ireland and in the Middle East in particular, is how to design an indicator framework that can adequately reflect and bring insights into the complex relationship between religion and politics.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIFFERENT INDICATORS AND INDEXES:

The seminar raised some interesting questions in terms of the relationship between the many different empirical tools and frameworks available for measuring progress toward desirable goals. These all use their own methodologies and indicators depending on what they are trying to measure and to what purpose, but there is also a lot of overlap between them. Key questions raised include whether – and, if so, how – to bring them together and to fill any gaps to provide a more coherent whole that would support more ‘joined up’ analysis. To this end, would it be advisable to attempt some form of standardisation in line with the trend for standardising conflict analysis tools generally?

Inevitably, each index has its own history and purpose underlying the approach and selection of indicators, and not every index will be relevant or helpful in every situation. To take an example presented at the seminar – the eight ‘Pillars of Peace’ identified by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), not surprisingly to some extent, reflect the economics and development backgrounds of those who designed its conceptual framework. A different group of people from other disciplines would likely have come up with something similar, but perhaps with slightly different pillars or with different emphasis or nuances between and within them. For example, from a diversity management perspective, the pillar of good government could be reframed to further emphasise principles and practices of good governance, in the broadest sense of governance in the interests of the whole population, and the implications for political architecture and legal frameworks and institutions. One suggestion could be for the IEP to revise the indicators incorporating perspectives from

other disciplines and approaches to peacebuilding, perhaps not considered so far. There is certainly plenty of scope for further development, nuancing and rebalancing as the project develops, especially in creating country indexes. However, from a practical perspective, there are hundreds if not thousands of data sources that can be relevant in the process of building peaceful and cohesive shared societies. Perhaps rather than tinkering with different frameworks to make them more uniform or inclusive of different perspectives, we should simply recognise the value (and try to identify the added value) of different indexes, accept the inconsistencies and differences between them and treat them as a pool on which to draw when considering any particular country (or region of a country) that is particularly affected by conflict. Starting with a selection of the most pertinent information already available from the various monitoring instruments, it should then be able to craft a balanced and targeted country framework that responds to and reflects the specifics of the situation. An index of the full range of potentially applicable available indexes (perhaps involving a mapping of their influences, approaches and areas of overlap) could potentially be a useful resource for those engaged in such a process.

LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

If indicator frameworks at national level are not sufficiently developed or nuanced to provide an accurate analysis then there is a risk that the areas they emphasise and priorities they set will not correspond with the specifics of the situation. Local indicators for peace (as presented by Roger Mac Ginty), identified by communities themselves, provide a promising – though as yet relatively untested – prospect for feeding emotional intelligence and another level of data into the picture. One drawback noted by Mac Ginty is that as people tend to prioritise the hyper-local and focus on issues of most direct concern to them, the broader political context can be missed. This observation also seems to be borne out by the experience of the Northern Ireland longitudinal survey which suggests that people tend to be most concerned about the issues directly impacting on them such as personal security and crime, etc. Again, the recognition of ‘methodological pluralism’ as an asset would seem to be the way forward so that local information is complemented by and calibrated with other quantitative and qualitative data from a range of sources (which might also include the views of commentators, policy-makers, and local leaders, etc.). Rather than pursuing standardisation, perhaps more attention should therefore be focused on how to connect different types of research and analysis (including participatory approaches) at different levels.

The role of the media both in influencing public opinion and helping to shape narratives, but also as a tool in sharing the results of surveys also warrants

further exploration so that its potential (e.g. in terms of advocacy) can be more effectively harnessed.

CONCLUSION

The seminar highlighted a number of negatives and challenges, from the fallibility of the data that inform various indexes to the challenges of analysis, including in the design of indicator frameworks and bridging the gaps between different monitoring tools. Monitoring change in diverse societies is never going to be an exact science, but the seminar also helped to identify some potential steps and measures to address these shortcomings and challenges (some of which are referenced above). More interaction would be helpful between academics and practitioners from different disciplines and backgrounds, who are involved in designing or carrying out monitoring processes. Consultation is also important with (potential) users in positions to influence or effect change (e.g. national policy-makers and international funders), or to advocate for it (e.g. INGOs and national Civil Society Organisations). Other stakeholders such as the media also need to be involved. These interactions will be helpful in the process of further identifying challenges and shaping approaches and developing strategies to overcome them.

Notes

- ¹ A useful guide on identifying and responding to discrimination is available here: www.iqdiplomacy.org.
- ² This was written before the last fighting in Gaza.
- ³ Stewart, 2002
- ⁴ These are: labour market mobility, family reunion, education, political participation, long-term residency, access to nationality and anti-discrimination. See further: www.mipex.eu.

References

Stewart, F. (2002) 'Horizontal Inequalities: A Neglected Dimension of Development', *Queen Elizabeth House Working Paper Series, Number 81*, Oxford, Queen Elizabeth House.