

Higher Education Conflict and Postconflict Conditions: Colombia and Kenya

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What role have universities played during armed conflict and postconflict? International organizations, such as UNESCO and the World Bank, have acknowledged the importance of higher education for economic development. They have also stressed the importance of economic development to achieve peace in conflict-affected nations. However, the connection between higher education and peace building remains largely unexplored.

The cases of Colombia and Kenya can shed some light on this issue. These countries have many characteristics in common, as well as important differences. Both of them are medium-size countries, they have similar number of inhabitants

(Colombia, 47 million; Kenya, 42 million), and have suffered internal armed conflict. Colombia, which is currently considered a middle-income country, has been a relatively stable, yet very imperfect democracy since 1819 (with a dictatorial episode between 1953 and 1958). Kenya, a low- to middle-income country, achieved its independence in 1963 from the British and has experienced political tumult—with aborted coup attempts, dictatorial presidential regimes, and general election unrest in 1992 and 1997. In 2007–2008, Kenya experienced yet another contentious election campaign that resulted in the deaths of over 1,500 people and the displacement of at least 300,000 Kenyans. The risk of violence continues as Kenya ranks 22nd on a list of 163 countries vulnerable to instability and conflict.

COLOMBIA

Colombia's armed conflict started in 1964. It is considered a low-intensity conflict and affects mostly the rural areas of the country. Unlike other armed conflicts, the Colombian educational system has not been dismantled as a consequence of the confrontation. However, the impact of the conflict in higher education is undeniable, and while the media gives some attention to the riots, infiltration, and effects of the conflict on universities, the efforts from many higher education

institutions and their communities to build peace or to help people affected by the conflict rarely make it to the headlines.

Colombian higher education institutions have contributed to the demobilization of former combatants. Some public universities (e.g., Distrital, Pedagógica, and del Valle) admitted groups (about 200 people each) of demobilized guerrillas as regular students. Today, most public universities and some private ones have special quotas for demobilized combatants, forcibly displaced people, and veterans of the regular forces who have been decorated or have been seriously wounded in combat. For those who do not have the credentials to be admitted in higher education programs, some higher education institutions have created nonformal education programs, to train them in specific crafts so they can make a living.

Under the umbrella concepts of service and extension (outreach), many Colombian universities have developed programs to benefit displaced people, demobilized soldiers, or the communities in which they live. University clinics providing legal advice and representation, psychological guidance, and other services are very common. A few universities have projects on victims' memory recovery, including a radio program (Universidad Santo Tomás' "La Palabra Tiene la Palabra"), a Web page created to honor those leaders of land restitution

processes (<http://www.estatierraesmia.co/>) or a spin-off foundation from the Universidad Sergio Arboleda, to make victims visible.

KENYA

The violence of the 2007–2008 presidential elections manifested predominantly in Nairobi, the Rift Valley, and the western and coast regions of the country. During the recent crisis, public services ground to halt, with many universities forced to close their doors. Yet, the impact of the election violence on higher education in Kenya has been virtually ignored by both the media and the scholarship. Even the famous Waki Report neglects to address the universities in any substantive manner. However, many administrators and faculty at public institutions in Kenya attempted to ameliorate the impact of the crisis, on campus and in the surrounding communities.

The epicenter of the conflict, Nairobi, is home to many higher education institutions, as well as two major public universities—Kenyatta University and the University of Nairobi. At these universities, activities, processes, and new practices related to conflict transformation occurred both throughout the conflict and post conflict. Attempts were made at both institutions to cut across conflict lines through conflict resolution workshops, as well as by providing charity to campus stakeholders affected by the conflict. At Kenyatta, the outreach office

became central to the charity efforts—providing clothing and food to students and staff. Finally, university staff at both institutions reported a shift in their thinking, regarding the role of the university in society, capitalizing on the shared identity of those at the institution through counseling sessions with students and staff alike. At the University of Nairobi, administrators described seeking to disrupt misinformation campaigns that would incite violence on campus through peer counseling, involving student leaders and student-led organizations. Moreover, the universities attempted to contain potentially volatile issues that may have led to violence on campus—such as insisting upon tuition payment during the crisis, by deferring fees for students.

Recently, Kenyatta University opened a branch campus in the Dadaab refugee camp, in the northeastern province of Kenya, home to both Somali refugees and the internally displaced, bringing hope to many in the camp. The branch campus brings graduate and undergraduate programs in Project Management, Public Administration, Finance, and Education to Dadaab, considered the largest refugee camp in the world. Research consistently shows that increased investment in education drives down the potential for conflict; therefore, when refugees are repatriated, they will bring with them the knowledge and skills to rebuild a more peaceful society. As a result of the conflict and the universities attempts to redress its impact, institutions in Kenya

have begun to acknowledge their agency in peace building and, subsequently, development.

CONCLUSION

The armed conflict has affected higher education in both countries—in the Kenyan case, to the point of producing temporary closure of some universities. However, the impact of the conflict in higher education and, mostly, the potential contribution of higher education to the construction of peace have been, in general, ignored.

One important point in common to both countries is that conflict transformation efforts started during the conflict stage; universities did not wait until the end of the conflict, or the signing of a truce or a peace agreement, to start their peace-building efforts. Peace-building efforts have taken many shapes: from charity activities organized as outreach for the university community, to contributing to social and economic development; from conflict resolution workshops, to unemployment buffering through higher and nonformal education; from contributing to the demobilization of combatants, to the provision of higher education in refugee camps.

Peace building, as a role of higher education, must be more than just a reaction to conflict, it must be infused into the purpose of higher education in

fragile states. Providing opportunities to universities to play a role in peace building and funding university activities in conflict abatement may contribute to a new discourse and sustainable responses to violence.