

POSTWAR RECONSTRUCTION/Richard Gueli

# New strategies for helping to mend the African fabric

**U**NSTABLE states, especially those plagued by war, pose a grave danger to SA's national security — the kind of danger that creates floods of refugees, hinders regional development and keeps foreign investment away. So, for SA, assisting broken states from our own backyard, or providing indirect support to others who do, may yield rich dividends in terms of our own national interests and commitment to creating a "better Africa".

The puzzle that South African officials must now tackle is to understand what form of foreign assistance is needed to freeze violent conflicts and prevent their reignition. This is because United Nations (UN) officials report that peace agreements in Africa have only a 50% success rate, which is hardly a statistic to boast about.

To improve this record, much has been said and written about "postconflict reconstruction" and the degree to which it can nurture and sustain peace agreements.

"SA will place a lot more emphasis on postconflict reconstruction since it is evident that the continent is moving into a phase where (state renewal) will take centre stage," Deputy Foreign Minister Aziz Pahad said in Athens last year.

But what is postconflict reconstruction?

While there is no common definition of the term, it is used broadly to describe a foreign intervention that aims to rebuild a country devastated by civil war. This kind of assistance, experts say, extends beyond keeping peace, protecting civilians and disarming combatants, to providing the building blocks for self-governance, economic exchange, and development.

Perhaps the best known and only really successful example in history of postwar reconstruction is the Marshall Plan, the US-backed programme to rebuild western Europe after the Second World War. Since then, things have only gotten worse for reconstruction, particularly in Africa.

This is what usually happens. After accepting a political deal, armed militants turn away from violence and enter mainstream politics. But before long, local authorities and international aid agencies lose the confidence of citizens, as they fail to provide basic needs and create jobs. The result: more conflict.

This scenario has been played out so many times that the utility of modern postconflict reconstruction is in question.

So what's the problem?

The startling conclusion is that experts don't really know, and that's because a standard theory on reconstruction is still lacking. This means that, to this day, policy makers have little clarity or consensus on how to rebuild war-torn states.

But this scepticism has not taken hold in Africa. In fact, since 2004, the African Union (AU) has taken great pains to develop a policy framework for reconstruction. On paper, the framework identifies big goals; whether these can be achieved is another question altogether. For instance, a key aim of the AU

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framework is to rebuild "key social sectors such as housing, energy, water and sanitation, as well as physical infrastructure".

To the unwary, this sounds impressive until they learn that the majority of states in Africa are largely oblivious to the quality and quantity of their construction industries.

Not only is the AU unclear on how to rebuild states in Africa, it also lacks African "state builders"; and this imbalance is forcing AU officials to rely on foreigners to do the job, which perpetuates the problem of African dependency, or to turn to military solutions, which tend to fail.

The question now is: what is SA doing to turn the AU's rhetoric on reconstruction into reality? The answer, regrettably, is very little. For example, since 2003, SA has been charged by the AU to lead African reconstruction efforts in war-torn Sudan, and so far has done precious little. In southern Sudan, basic infrastructure is almost zero and real development is simply not taking place. Just last year, a development worker warned in Business in Africa that "people in southern Sudan need buildings, power, highways, hospitals — they need everything".

Of course, levelling criticism at SA's foray into the enterprise of development is easy on this page. Reconstruction poses a big challenge for any country, big or small: the US, for all its experience and money, is still trying to understand and master what is needed for reconstructing a country (even after Afghanistan and Iraq). Reconstruction doesn't come cheap either: a RAND Corporation study estimates that operations can cost anything from \$1,5bn-\$15bn a year and usually last from five to 10 years.

Does it make sense, then, for SA to help other states with development, and in the process devolve billions in aid money, which could instead be used to tackle its own service delivery problems?

The answer is yes. We can't avoid dealing with dysfunctional states, and that's because our own safety and prosperity is invariably linked with the stability of our neighbours.

This "inescapable responsibility" may require SA to deal more effectively with reconstruction than it has done until now.

Four things ought to happen in government before this instrument can begin to work for SA as well as for the rest of Africa.

**First, change the rules that stipulate that foreign assistance is entirely the preserve of the foreign affairs and defence departments. That's because our diplomats and soldiers lack formal training in development economics.**

**Second, map out a reconstruction agenda to assist legislators and planners to get clarification on what SA can — and cannot — do about rebuilding weak states. This agenda should recognise a basic limitation of every peace process — that is, foreigners cannot import peace; the best they can do is to kick-start the process.**

**Third, align reconstruction planning with diplomacy, because the key to ending Africa's wars lies in development and not in defence. In this regard, recent decisions in the US, UK, Canada, Germany and France to create new intergovernmental reconstruction units, staffed by multidisciplinary teams, make this a strategy well worth looking at.**

**Fourth, invest in science and technology, because advances in this field will boost our capacity to produce tangible and sustainable solutions for lifting people out of poverty.**

**Fifth, forget about addressing every detail of the AU reconstruction framework — it's a futile, utopian idea. Instead, pilot projects on issues in which significant domain expertise already exists in SA, and which are crucial for doing reconstruction, such as mine-clearance (to clear roads and stimulate the exchange of goods) and labour-based construction (to create jobs for ex-combatants).**

**Last, but certainly not least, team up with business, because considerable untapped skills needed for reconstruction, such as engineering, construction, and project management, exist in this sector. Yes, personal security is a problem for big business. But the private sector's ability to plan, build and finance significant infrastructure projects and create jobs is unparalleled and this know-how is important for successful reconstruction, especially when it matters most — immediately after the shooting stops.**

**Making reconstruction a core function of government could make SA's foreign assistance more strategic and effective. But SA cannot advance regional development without international help. As an article in Foreign Affairs points out, the best way to avoid state failure is to prevent it, and the best way to prevent it is to help poor nations diversify their economies. This is a critical point. The Marshall Plan has shown that the key to real reconstruction is ultimately trade, so boosting African trade is where the fight against poverty will be won or lost.**

The problem is that the world's big powers are less likely to open up their markets if Africa doesn't get its house in order. Africa's poor countries, conversely, are more likely to deteriorate without trade and foreign investment. This is a major predicament, but not an impossible one to beat if states in Africa, especially the richer ones, finally get serious about reconstruction.

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