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Conflict and Sustainability

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Description

This paper draws attention to an important aspect that has not gotten sufficient examination: How the substance of engineering programs and projects -- location, design, and effects on potential winners and losers -- can worsen, or ameliorate, hostilities in conflicted societies. In these situations, it is important that the engineers involved have the knowledge and tools needed for developing peace-building solutions.

Body

Engineers play central design and policy roles globally in infrastructure and construction projects -- in transportation, power generation, irrigation, mining and other sectors. Particularly in developing countries, this may thrust them into violent conflict situations arising from geopolitical disputes, rival claims over resources, unequal distribution of benefits and costs, or power struggles. Conflicts among communities, peoples, and nations can arise from many causes. Engineering programs and projects may themselves be among the problems at issue. Where efforts to bring about peaceful solutions fail, the resulting violent conflict can create the greatest possible threat to a project's sustainability, i.e. outright destruction.

Is engineering education preparing students to understand and to address these problems? If not, how should these perspectives be introduced into engineering curricula? Do the perspectives raised in this paper need to be more widely

considered by the engineering profession, and if so, how should this be accomplished? How should engineering research be enriched to integrate these socio-political aspects with purely technical research subjects?

Engineering professionals may unavoidably be parties in conflict situations. Depending on how engineers approach the identification, design, and implementation of projects, they can aggravate underlying tensions among stakeholders, even creating new divisions between winners and losers, or they can ameliorate or even prevent conflict in the first place. Social responsibilities facing engineers has become a subject of its own, explored in books and engineering ethics journals. Apart from their role in the development and manufacture of armaments, the relationships between engineering and conflict, especially in developing countries, has been less well examined. Engineers have a responsibility to ensure that decision makers are aware of the potential effects of engineering works in situations of social and political contention, and of the need to explore alternative solutions that may ease tensions at issue.

Many engineering projects in the U.S. are sources of political conflict, e.g. disputes over the location of wind farms; the technology for, and unintended consequences of, extracting natural gas from shale formations; environmental effects of mining projects; location and risks of off-shore oil drilling; new pipeline location and environmental risks. Although such disputes can reach fever pitch, they have rarely ended in violent conflict, thanks to the country's strong traditions and institutions for legal and legislative conflict resolution. In many developing countries, by contrast, groups that viewed their vital interests at stake in engineering decisions have sometimes resorted to violence to resolve disputes not settled through negotiation or orderly political process. In some cases, engineering projects have deepened inter-group animosities that may have arisen initially for other reasons – religious, cultural, economic or political.

There have also been positive-sum outcomes, where projects have been designed and decided through processes deliberately aimed at avoiding exacerbation of underlying animosities. Even more proactive are engineering investments designed to create common economic and/or communal interests among groups in societies marked by socio-economic fault lines.

In the most extreme cases (for example, in Iraq and Afghanistan), engineering projects have been implemented in the midst of active warfare, often designed to

influence the allegiance of the expected beneficiaries. Engineering in the midst of violent conflict poses a special set of problems for, even personal dangers to, the engineers involved. The US Institute of Peace, the National Academy of Engineering, and other scholarly and professional organizations have for some time been encouraging examination of the role of engineers in conflict environments. This effort has focused on problem analysis, coordination among actors with different mandates and capabilities, methods for ensuring the “buying-in” of the relevant stakeholders, and the special difficulties posed by working in situations of active conflict. These special challenges of engineering in the midst of violent hostilities are outside the scope of this paper.

This paper draws attention to an important aspect that has not gotten sufficient examination: How the substance of engineering programs and projects -- location, design, and effects on potential winners and losers -- can worsen, or ameliorate, hostilities in conflicted societies. In these situations, it is important that the engineers involved have the knowledge and tools needed for developing peace-building solutions.

Global climate change is emerging rapidly as a threat to the sustainability of entire ecosystems and patterns of human settlement. Coping with climate change may pose engineering and sociopolitical challenges of historic dimensions. Engineering solutions will be central components for dealing with problems such as emissions reduction, flood control, migration and resettlement of forced migrant populations, coastal erosion, seaport viability, development of alternative energy, and resistance of structures to weather extremes. Inherent in many of these problems is a high potential for social and political, even inter-country, conflict. To help ensure that their technical contributions are appropriate and fully understood, engineers will need to learn skills of multi-disciplinary analysis, and how to dialogue effectively with stakeholders and with partners from other disciplines.

The Roles of Engineers

Engineers are found at advisory, decision-making, or design levels in the processes leading up to project realization in conflict situations. Engineers also play important roles in the management and operation of projects once they come on line. While senior engineers will have greater responsibility for decisions and options chosen,

professionals at all levels are in position to consider the social and conflict consequences of projects they work on, and to put their views on the table. The individual engineer may be a political office-holder, a civil servant, an executive or employee in a private (local or international) contracting firm, a private consultant, an academic on an engineering faculty, or a staff member of an international development organization. Many engineering fields may be involved in conflict-laden contexts – civil, hydraulic, electrical, transport, mining, petroleum, agricultural, etc. Those responsible for the technical core need to develop a) skills of coordination, negotiation, and communication with stakeholders, b) the ability to take account of environmental, social, and other impact studies, and c) the ability to work in multidisciplinary teams that include expertise in political and social analysis.

The scope for engineers to determine the final design and implementation of a project, therefore, will be determined by the interplay of the preferences of the various players and by where the influence of the design team's perspectives can be applied. Engineers on the staff of the World Bank, or in an engineering firm contracted by the Bank, for example, might be well positioned to affect the outcome if the Bank's financing is crucial. On the other hand, engineers working within their own government or for a local contractor may have greater say on the domestic policy-making process. Needless to say, the engineer will have wider scope to shape a peace-enhancing outcome where the government also seeks to discourage conflict. Conversely, if a government deliberately pursues a policy that exacerbates internal hostilities, there may be few options to promote amelioration.

The World Bank's experience with hydroelectric and irrigation projects in developing countries shows how projects have had to be developed beyond their technically-defined boundaries to take account of connections with other disciplines, and of possible conflict effects. For years the Bank avoided hydroelectric projects after incurring severe criticism for ignoring bad outcomes for displaced and indigenous people. The Bank resumed hydro projects in the 1990s after adopting safeguard requirements on compensation, and attention to potential conflicts. In fact, the Bank has adopted a set of "Safeguards" in project formulation across the board, requiring project designers to take account of potentially adverse consequences. The safeguards include, for example, attention to problems of international or disputed waterways, potentially adverse social or environmental effects, impact on indigenous peoples, involuntary settlement requirements, and impact on physical

cultural resources.

Examples: Exacerbation vs. Prevention

International frictions over natural resource development claims can grow into outright conflict. Examples of areas with worrisome overlapping claims include islands in the South China Sea (with oil-potential), claimed by Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan, and China; northern and southern Sudan (oil production and pipelines); division of water resources among Lebanon, Israel, and West Bank Palestine; and hydro and irrigation schemes along the Mekong affecting downstream countries. Internal conflicts in developing countries - over mineral, land, water and other development projects - have arisen in (among others) Peru, Colombia, India, Papua New Guinea, Mexico, Ecuador, Ghana, and Bangladesh.

Proper engineering solutions can help prevent violent outcomes. Soon after partition separated Pakistan from India in 1947, it became clear that failure to create a system for control and distribution of the Indus River waters acceptable to both countries could result in warfare. The World Bank took the lead in designing, negotiating, and financing a multi-dam irrigation solution. Unfortunately, although the program was adopted and implemented, peacefully resolving the Indus dispute, India and Pakistan have had other disputes that have led to recurrent armed conflict.

An unequivocally successful example is the Gal Oya irrigation project in Sri Lanka, built in 1948-1952. The upper arms of the canals watered areas occupied by ethnic Sinhalese, the country's dominant ethnicity, who drew most of the water before it could reach the lower stretches that fed minority Tamil areas. Tensions created by this situation resulted in violent conflict in the late 1950s and sporadically in the two following decades. A USAID-supported project (1978-1986) rehabilitated the irrigation infrastructure and introduced a new inclusive water management system. To create a win-win situation, inter-ethnic farmer groups were set up to oversee cooperative water distribution, ensuring that the downstream Tamils received enough flow for cultivation. Despite efforts of the Tamil Tigers, the insurgent side in the Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009), to persuade Tamil farmers to cease cooperating with their Sinhalese neighbors, the groups held fast. Relations between the Gal Oya ethnic communities remained, and still are, peaceful and mutually

beneficial.

By contrast, another Sri Lankan irrigation scheme became a major missed opportunity where engineering works exacerbated rather than ameliorating a deep socio-political conflict. The massive Mahaweli project, begun in 1970, the biggest engineering works in the island's history, was first designed with a channel that would have delivered water to the largely Tamil region of northern Sri Lanka. In 1977 the Sri Lankan authorities redesigned the project to exclude the northern channel. The decision was defended on ostensibly technical engineering grounds, but was seen by the Tamils as demonstrating Sinhalese discrimination and hegemony. The government also favored Sinhalese in the settlement plan for land that would be newly opened by the project. Retaining the original designs of this major project might have helped avert the subsequent political deterioration that spiraled into warfare.

A rural development project in Rwanda that started in 1974 is another example of a missed opportunity that turned out instead to exacerbate tensions. In this case, the benefits (including structures, roads, and land access) were largely captured by local Hutus, excluding Tutsis. The final result was judged by one Africa scholar to be "a great increase in inequality between regions, social classes, groups and individuals."

In two examples from Thailand, irrigation projects were constructed (in the 1950s-1970s) to win population loyalty in a region that was poor and had been traditionally neglected by the central government. Some were built despite awareness that the projects' economic justifications were dubious. Others were built even though the sponsoring and designing engineering authorities knew that due to poor soil conditions the projects could not even meet minimum engineering standards. In these decisions, the expected social and political benefits were seen as justifying the sub-optimal engineering.

Projects to improve transportation can help develop poor regions. New or improved roads can lower the costs of getting agricultural produce to markets. These projects can also have downsides where they open up areas already inhabited by people previously marginal in terms of economic or political power. New low-cost access can draw developers of large-scale agriculture, cattle-ranching, or resource extraction, who may expropriate the land of the previously isolated inhabitants. This has been a significant problem in Brazil.

As these examples show, there are no cookie-cutter solutions; each project is imbedded in a different and unique socio-political context. The standard methodologies for technical and economic analysis have to be complemented with in-depth local social analysis. Technical sustainability alone will be insufficient. To accomplish this, close inter-disciplinary dialogue will usually be essential.

Examples of Questions in Project Design

To be alert to the relevance of projects to potential conflict, engineers (and others involved in planning and implementation) should take account of factors such as:

1. Is the project located near borders between rival groups?
2. Will the location and design of irrigation channels impinge on divisions between different ethnic (or religious, etc) groups?
3. In the case of international waterways, consider the World Bank's safeguard cautions.
4. The World Bank cautions should similarly be applied to projects in internationally contested areas, and in border-spanning resource development (e.g. natural gas, petroleum, water).
5. Are there external "diseconomies" (e.g. pollution causing health or economic damage) that should be taken into account in the project design?
6. Is a project affecting areas inhabited by indigenous people? How will this affect design, cost, negotiation, and implementation?
7. Will environmental degradation caused by a mining project be avoided or at least minimized?
8. Will there be fair compensation payments/projects for people negatively affected?
9. Will road location raise issues of equity and benefits between favored and bypassed communities?
10. The feasibility of projects often depends on how stakeholders view the potential consequences. Have provisions for stakeholder consultation been included in the design process?

Peace-Building and Engineering Education

Engineering education curricula should be enriched with peace education components, relevant multi-disciplinary materials, and specific engineering case studies and issues, as suggested above.

Engineering schools located at universities with faculties or institutes that offer programs, or advanced degrees, in conflict studies/management, could draw on such capabilities to develop options for introducing a conflict perspective into engineering curricula. For conflict-studies programs, exposure of their students to the relevant roles and perspectives of the engineering profession would also be a curriculum enrichment. Engineering schools at universities that do not have resident conflict studies faculty could draw on outside sources such as the US Institute of Peace; Engineers Without Borders; the Engineering, Peace and Social Justice network; the ASEE Engineering Ethics Division, or other relevant organizations, like Global Peace Services USA.

Options for such curriculum enhancement might include the following:

1. A one-day or half-day module requirement: a general introduction to the field of peace studies, both academic and applied. The role of engineering projects and engineers in situations of socio-political tension and conflict. Building in sustainability against the threats posed by stakeholder divisiveness, and by climate change effects.
2. A workshop on options and responsibilities of engineers needing to work with communities, stakeholders, peace-builders, and policy makers, in conflict environments.
3. A two-day “saturation” experience expanding on the above.
4. A full credit seminar (meeting, say, once a week for a semester) during which students would research actual cases to design possible solutions, project location/design alternatives, and methods for achieving stakeholder buy-in in the specific political and cultural environment settings.
5. Possible special perspectives:

The unique challenges posed for engineering organizations working in situations of on-going violent conflict, including working with (UN or NATO-backed) military forces attempting to resolve hostilities or maintain a peace agreement.

Coping with the effects of global climate change in many different geographic, climate and settlement environments will require large-scale engineering works and innovative challenges. There may be winners and losers (say, where the effects force large population movements). Different engineering solutions may produce different distributions of benefits and costs, entailing substantial potential conflicts of interest.

Finally, it is worth noting that inclusion of sustainability and global issues is a recent development in engineering education. It opens up new possibilities for internship with non-governmental organizations and for in-service learning. It also has the potential to engage students with concrete issues of professional ethics, and to provide motivation to be part of a service profession.

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Notes

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