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It is time to rethink our protection imperative

By **CARLOS LOPES**

The number of refugees, internal displaced persons, and asylum seekers are increasing worldwide.

In 2013, the number capped 51 million, of which about a third are Africans. Images of the horrors in the Central African Republic and South Sudan, Mediterranean boat people or dying migrants in the desert are real and graphic. There is no way they should be placed under the blanket of the Africa rising narrative.

Over 7 million Somalis remind us that protracted conflict and complex emergencies can last and affect entire neighborhoods. We need to understand the complexity of these social and political developments. Forced displacements blur African gains and confuse perceptions. The toxic combination of discrimination, demonizing sexual violence, stereotyping and xenophobia, is all too familiar. Managing diversity is accepted as the number one governance challenge in the continent.

Unfortunately this story is not Africa specific; it stretches far and wide from Ukraine to Gaza, Colombia to Afghanistan, Syria to Myanmar - despite data demonstrating a diminishing number of conflicts. They are part of new trends that include what is designated as extremism. Is it new? Is there something we should be aware of as we try to bring the dots together?

The post World War Two international architecture is based on the principles of the sovereign State, the so-called Westphalian State. The Westphalian system that was previously regional in scope and civilizational in identity, evolved into a universal framework. The western influenced secularism, or separation of State and religion, has been accelerating. It is reaffirming a particular form of legitimacy. The international system has also gradually transformed individual rights into a universal value system. The principles of neo-liberal democracy, and its forms of public accountability, became the embodiment of a new internationally legitimized State authority.

When the new legitimized and accepted forms of State authority are challenged we invoke recent additions to international law, such as the responsibility to protect (R2P). Some say R2P is both redundant and utopian. Redundant from a legal perspective when it prescribes States to prevent genocide and mass atrocities within their borders. Utopian when it believes others should spend scarce resources to deal with others failures. R2P, from idea to norm, epitomizes the evolution of our notion of state sovereignty.

Since the end of the Cold War, we have been missing a true strategic reflection on new forms of hegemonic power. Not necessarily state-led, but also the ones protagonized by non-State actors; those who do not conform to the structured distribution of power. This is important because the State's legitimate use of power and authority is being challenged. With it, secularism is being challenged, as are democratic values. This is not an African or Islamic issue; it is a worldwide phenomena. We just need to pay attention to populist and intolerant political movements in western countries to realize it.

The more views are repressed, the more they spiral into conflict. Non-State actors assert themselves with alternative forms of legitimacy. With new communication technologies, networking is experiencing a multi-fold increase, in turn making these developments transnational. Local conflicts either get connected to transnational ones or are perceived at the global or international level in isolation from the local context.

Pastoralists missing the economic transitions in marginalised Sahel countries become easily associated with extremism alone. Deep rooted illicit flows to exploit Great Lakes coltan we all use in our cell phones are just perceived as resulting from ethnic conflict. Evaporating fish stocks and toxic dumping in the coast of Somalia, obliging fisherman to reconvert their ways of life are just reduced to piracy. The examples abound.

Extremism, particularly religious extremism, as practiced by Boko Haram, Seleka, Anti-Balaka, Al Shabbab, some of the Libya militia or other AQIM and Mujao, are manifestations of a larger trend. Fragile institutions in the countries where they operate offer them fertile ground. Corruption, inequality, lack of political representation, cultural alienation and sometimes repression, all contribute to making it attractive to the unemployed youth looking for rewarding prospects.

To offer solutions to counter these strong ideological movements we need to embrace complexity and comprehensiveness. More than passing references to socio-economic dimensions of conflict, we need to avoid terminology simplifications such as the use or abuse, of the expression "post-conflict". Human society always had and will have conflict; in Africa and elsewhere. Our common aim is to reduce violent conflict.

All of the above increase the number of forcibly displaced. We live in a time of uncertainty - the old is fading and the new is not yet born. Our protection moral imperative will have to navigate this complexity. Institutions like the OECD Development Centre and the Economic Commission for Africa should work together to chart the way.

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