



# Quaker United Nations Office

## **“Lessons Learned: Conflict Prevention, Institutions and Governance”**

Quaker United Nations Office, New York (QUNO), presentation at a meeting of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Conflict Prevention and Resolution in Africa, chaired by Rwanda, on the theme: *“Institution Building and Good Governance as Conflict Prevention Tools”* on 26<sup>th</sup> July, 2013.

### **Introduction**

Many thanks to the chair, and to my fellow speakers for their very interesting contributions. Recently we have been hearing a lot about governance and institution building in the context of their role in sustainable development, particularly in the post 2015 framework discussion. So it is salutary to remind ourselves that governance and institution building have a key role in violent conflict prevention, and are thanks are due to the chair for bringing these issues to the attention of the ad hoc working group today.

One of the most useful recent summaries of research and lessons learned in this area is the 2011 World Development Report, which makes the connections clear: “states with weak institutions run the greatest risk of the onset and recurrence of civil war, and of extreme levels of criminal violence.” And again, “All societies face stresses, but only some succumb to repeated violence...the underlying reason for societies’ inability to resist stresses is that their institutions are too weak to mediate them peacefully.”

In my remarks today I plan to outline a little of the history of the development of some of these ideas at the UN, to comment on some specific lessons learned, and to elaborate on the key role of civil society.

### **History**

As with so many topics related to peacebuilding and the prevention of violent conflict, a good starting place is Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s ground-breaking “An Agenda for Peace” from 1992. The report squarely addresses the issue of root causes: “Our aims must be... in the largest sense, to address the deepest causes of conflict: economic despair, social injustice and political oppression”. Nine years later, the 2001 Secretary-General’s Report on the Prevention of Armed Conflict focuses again on root causes: “Development assistance ... needs to focus on decreasing the key structural risk factors that fuel violent conflict, such as inequity, inequality, justice and insecurity .. by strengthening accountable and transparent governance”. In particular, it “should aim to strengthen society’s capacity for coping, managing and resolving tensions before violent conflict erupts...” including the “promotion of participatory and inclusive decision making on central economic, social and political issues”. The 2001 report is rather light on detail on how this might be accomplished, but by 2006, the concept of how such assistance might be provided has been substantially

developed, as outlined in the Progress Report on the Prevention of Armed Conflict, which introduces in some detail the idea of developing local capacities: “Essentially, the aim should be the creation of a sustainable national infrastructure for peace that allows societies and their governments to resolve conflicts internally and with their own skills, institutions and resources” – the elements of this might vary, but should include “democratic governance, respect for human rights, sound constitutions, participatory elections, a vibrant civil society and national dialogue and consensus building” . The report goes on to detail some of the efforts then underway through UNDP and DPA to address these issues – efforts whose latest achievements we have heard about today.

There has not been another Secretary General’s report on the prevention of Armed conflict since 2006: but the themes have been taken up in a variety of other reports and contexts, and we see them continued in recent documents such as the April 2013 Political Declaration on the Peaceful Resolution of Conflicts in Africa, which states in very much the same tradition, that “durable peace and sustainable development can be enhanced through inclusive political settlements and conflict resolution, increased protection and empowerment, as well as access to justice, employment, and improved socioeconomic conditions, transparency and accountability.”

Now, I’m reciting some of this history not just to reassure my colleagues that people do actually read these documents that they spend so much time writing, but to illustrate that a recognition of the key role of governance and institution building in conflict prevention is not at all new, and that *the issues of inclusion, inequality, accountability, justice, personal security and respect for human rights, as well as economic opportunity and service delivery, have been part of this discussion for the last 30 years.*

## **Institutions**

We have heard a lot about institutions and institution building already this afternoon, and so I would like to add just a couple of observations. First, *institutions are only meaningful to the extent that they reflect and formalize an underlying process, an underlying reality.* For example, you don’t create a democracy just by holding elections: a democracy grows out of a process of internalizing the habits of inclusive political dialogue. As we know, elections that are not genuinely inclusive, that do not provide real alternatives and which do not allow citizens to feel that their voices have been heard can be triggers of violence rather than milestones on the road to peace. Institutions can assist such processes, but cannot replace them: thus, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission can assist and complement a genuine, broader national reconciliation process, but the act of just putting a TRC in place in the absence of such an underlying process can itself lead to violence. This observation is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the example of constitution writing: to be sustainable, a constitution needs to emerge from an inclusive process of building national consensus around the core issues of how a society chooses to structure its interactions: at its best, the written constitution should be a matter of recording a consensus that has already been reached. As we have seen in a number of cases recently, constitutions that are not the result of broad consultative processes lack legitimacy and may themselves become causes of violence.

Secondly, although much of the discussion at the UN level focuses on the formal institutions of central government, the institutions that are seen by most people in a country affected by chronic violence and instability are local, and are often informal in character. In many such environments,

central governments are weak and local dispute resolution, justice, educational and service delivery functions may be carried out by a combination of informal, ad hoc, traditional or religious entities. Where these arrangements are functional and inclusive, they can form the basis of a network of formal and informal institutions that stretch from the communal to the national levels. At its best, *institution building can be a bottom-up process, building on the foundation of what is already in place*, and the capacity assessments that are done by governments and their international partners should always include an assessment of the informal institutions that are already in place at a local and regional level.

## **Governance**

When it comes to governance, I want to note two issues – capacity and accountability. In societies affected by chronic violence and instability, skilled personnel are often in short supply. Education systems have often been disrupted, local opportunities to develop business or administrative experience are limited, and many of those with skills and training may have left the country. External actors can often exacerbate the problem – it is a common phenomenon in such situations that we see international NGOs, international businesses and even the UN itself competing for a small pool of local candidates with the appropriate experience, paying wages that are high in the local context and making it even more difficult to attract experienced personnel into governance functions. Similarly, experienced individuals in the diaspora may be keen to help, but have to accept a significant drop in compensation to take a government position. One approach that has been taken has been to supplement local capacity with external advisors, but such an approach itself is inadequate unless there is a very deliberate effort to transfer skills. There is no easy solution to this, but *there has to be a strong focus on developing local skills and capacities*: South South exchanges can be helpful here, as can an insistence that any use of external skills include a significant training component. But this is a key issue, which speaks to related topics such as corruption – government servants need to know that they can make a dependable living.

The other comment on governance that I wanted to make is about accountability. In many countries affected by violence and instability, most people may never have experienced an effective government – and the manifestations of government they may have encountered may have been actively predatory. So, *a key element in strengthening governance is trust*: people need to see that government is not only competent, but that it is fair, that it is working in the interests of the people. And in this, accountability is key, not just to satisfy foreign donors, but to establish a sustainable relationship between society and the state.

## **Role of civil society**

The importance of the role of civil society has been emphasized in all of the Secretary-General's reports on the prevention of armed conflict. At best, civil society and the state have a complementary relationship, a partnership based on mutual understanding of relative resources and skills – and this is the case in the richest societies as much as the poorest. Civil society plays an

essential role in the state/society relationship, providing services, bringing the views of all segments of society to the table, contributing a rich plurality of voices and competences. And in societies impacted by chronic violence and instability, they have a particularly important role: where central governments have been weak, often confined to capital, civil society groups in a variety of shapes and sizes have been filling the gap – they have been providing the governance. As such, they are key partners in the effort to increase the resilience of the society at a local and national level, and in the work to prevent violent conflict.

### **Inclusion and Legitimacy**

Finally, I wanted to touch on two issues that are key to this discussion of governance: inclusion and legitimacy. It has become very clear that the issue of inclusion is central to the prevention of violent conflict: to quote the SG's 2006 report "violence finds followers when people feel voiceless". In the past, though, this insight has been focused mainly around the exclusion of ethnic or religious or social minorities: although such societal divisions can be exploited to become engines of violence, as we see in a number of settings today, our understanding has grown to encompass the role of economic inequalities, vertical and horizontal, of gender inequalities, and age inequalities. The inclusion of the poor, of women, of youth, as well as of ethnic and religious minorities, is key to sustainable peace.

And lastly, legitimacy. I realize that legitimacy is a sensitive topic, but it is important here to recall the contexts we are discussing: societies impacted by chronic violence and instability. In these contexts, it is almost axiomatic that legitimacy is in flux. Particularly at a local level, where government may be largely absent, legitimacy is contested. And in the path towards resilience, towards a stable and peaceful society, legitimacy comes from trust, it comes from transparent and accountable institutions. Legitimacy cannot be imposed – it must be earned, and earned over time. To quote again from the Secretary General's 2006 report: "conflict is not finally over or averted until responsive and accountable state authority has been put in place"

Thank you.

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