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Why Human Rights at the UN? *Panel remarks during a meeting of the UN Human Rights and Prevention Caucus, hosted by Switzerland and Germany, UNHQ, New York: 3rd December 2018*

On 3rd December 2018, the co-chairs of the Human Rights and Prevention Caucus in New York hosted a discussion on how to position human rights in the reformed UN. QUNO was invited to contribute to the panel discussion to address the question of how better to make the case that respecting, promoting and protecting human rights is a foundation of both peace and security and sustainable development – the other two pillars of the UN.

QUNO remarks (as delivered)

Many thanks to the organizers and to my fellow speakers

While QUNO New York focuses on Peacebuilding and the Prevention of Violent Conflict, our sister office in Geneva has core work in Human Rights. As an organization present in both locations, we welcome this effort to bring the New York and Geneva communities of practice together on this important topic.

In the introduction to our discussion, it was noted that this, the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was an appropriate time to refresh our narrative around the place of human rights in UN efforts. Our observation is that this is an exercise that needs to be undertaken as a matter of urgency. This is a time of rapid change in the international community, and we can no longer take it as a given that there is a common understanding of the foundational role of human rights in the UN system and beyond.

Accordingly, we present here four narrative propositions for your consideration:

- Human Rights codify our common humanity, providing the foundation for human dignity and just societies
- Respect for human rights prevents violent conflict, limits the horrors of war, and sets us on the path to sustainable peace
- Human rights provide the backbone for sustainable development, and for the core 2030 Agenda aspiration of fostering peaceful, just and inclusive societies
- Human Rights are what connect the high-level processes of the United Nations to the hopes and needs of individuals and local communities around the world

1. Human Rights codify our common humanity, providing the foundation for human dignity and just societies

Human rights give us the lens that lets us say to the starving child in Yemen, that you are worth something, that you have the same right as we do to food, to water, to education, to freedom from want and fear and violence, to have your needs and aspirations respected by the community, the government, and the world. In this sense, then, *human rights codify our common humanity*.

Earlier this year, the peacebuilding organization International Alert published its 'Peace Perceptions Poll', which surveyed, using advanced polling techniques, more than 100,000 people in 15 countries, in all stages of development, about their experiences of violent conflict, and how they thought governments should respond.

- When considering responses to violence, the poll asked the question "*What would be most effective in creating long term peace?*". The top response was to "Deal with the reasons people fight in the first place". The alternative choices of "use military to address violence" or seek "assistance of international security forces" were among the least popular choices – even in countries like Syria and the DRC. The poll confirms that the most valued response to violent conflict is to address root causes.

- And what are these root causes? In a separate question, the poll asked, "*Why do people turn to violence?*" Ranked top among the responses was "a sense of injustice", followed closely by "lack of jobs or the need to provide for their families".

This is a clear and timely affirmation of the original insight of the UN Charter, that peace and security, sustainable development and human rights are inextricably linked.

2. Respect for human rights prevents violent conflict, limits the horrors of war, and sets us on the path to sustainable peace

Let us consider conditions before, during and after conflict, as the twin Sustaining Peace resolutions encourage us to do.

Before violent conflict, a lack of promotion and protection of human rights increases the likelihood of grievances that, if left unaddressed, can lead to violent conflict. This was clearly set out in the landmark UN/World Bank Pathways for Peace report, which explicitly notes that "Some of the greatest risks of violence today stem from the mobilization of perceptions of exclusion and injustice" and that "Countries where governments violate human rights … are at a higher risk for violent conflict" (ES p viii).

During violent conflict, in war, human rights remind us of our humanity, and in militarized response to perceived threats, including as part of counter terrorism and stabilization efforts, human rights remind us of the core values that we are trying to protect.

And *after* conflict, we are reminded that promoting and protecting human rights is a fundamental component of sustainable peace

3. Human rights provide the backbone for sustainable development, and for the core 2030 Agenda aspiration of fostering peaceful, just and inclusive societies

Paragraph 35 of the 2030 Agenda states: "The new Agenda recognizes the need to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies that provide equal access to justice and that are based on respect for human rights (including the right to development), on effective rule of law and good governance at all levels and on transparent, effective and accountable institutions"

And paragraph 4 commits: "As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society"

The connection here is that *human rights are the foundation of human dignity*. Human rights, including economic, social, cultural and collective rights, provide us with tools against which to measure our progress towards sustainable development, and are the ultimate yardstick against which we can measure the 2030 aspiration of 'no-one left behind'

4. **Human Rights are what connect the high-level processes of the United Nations to the hopes and needs of individuals and local communities around the world**

Human rights are the codification of our common humanity, our commitment to one another as human beings. Human rights give us the words to say I see you, I know you, I am you, to every child, woman and man.

Human rights provide the standards against which we can measure our own performance, as governments, as diplomats and UN officials and civil society leaders – they are the mirror in which we can face up to our own humanity

Above all, the United Nations derives much of its relevance and legitimacy from its embrace of human rights as an organizing principle and a moral driver. Human rights are what connects the UN to the needs and hopes of multitudes around the world – to the powerless, the voiceless – and those most in danger of being left behind

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