



QUNO

Quaker United Nations Office

Quaker UN Office Remarks

Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2019 Peace Con

Delivered by Megan Schmidt, UN Representative, Peacebuilding

Panel: Unrestricting Space for Peacebuilding and Social Justice

Good afternoon everyone. I'm excited to join you today and be a part of this important conversation.

I'd like to first thank our sister organization, the American Friends Service Committee, for the opportunity to join this panel.

My name is Megan Schmidt, and I am a UN Representative for the Quaker United Nations Office in New York.

I'd like to take a moment to tell you about our mission, and how the topic today connects to QUNO's work.

The issue of inclusion is a central one for us at the Quaker UN Office. We have been working to represent the concerns of Friends at the UN for 70 years, and our programming seeks to support a UN that promotes change through peaceful means, addresses root drivers of conflict and fragility, and develops and implements policies and practice that are inclusive - especially of the experiences and knowledge of practitioners and the communities that will be most impacted by those policies. Promoting and protecting civic space is critical to fostering inclusion, and thus critical to our mission. And fostering a more inclusive approach by the UN is key to its capacity for peacebuilding.

All of us here today know far too well that civil society faces increasing restrictions throughout the world, both through legal and illegal means of oppression.

The ever-growing crackdown on civic space is hindering or halting the peace work of organizations and activists, and risks breaking down the social fabric needed for building sustainable peace and resilience.

Against this backdrop, however, we see the positive impact that organizations and individuals are still able to have. This especially includes the range of roles that civil society continue to play, especially in conflict-affected societies and particularly in situations of transition or extreme fragility where they may actually be the primary peacebuilding agents.

They are the ones that have the localized expertise from long-term engagement in a community or country, an expertise that is all too often missing from policy discussions.

And together we can agree that the presence of a robust and active civil society is typically a strong indicator for a society's capacity to build and sustain peace.

And so, with this in mind, I'm especially keen to participate today, and to hear from all of you - to learn from your experiences working to build peace in restrictive spaces or to work with partners that are working in such environments.

It's this type of sharing and learning exchange that is key to addressing global challenges like the shrinking space for civil society and how this is affecting peacebuilding efforts across the world.

Now as I mentioned, I work for a civil society organization that focuses on the UN, and how to make this body better at building peace.

I've been asked by Saurav to reflect on some innovative and exciting work we've been a part of for the last year, which has centered on the development and creation of UN system-wide community engagement guidelines for peacebuilding and sustaining peace.

And I've been asked to reflect on how this work then connects partly to opportunities for unrestricting space for civil society through more meaningful and sustainable partnerships with the UN.

I'd like to talk with you about the why, the what, and the how of the community engagement guidelines process, and then connect this to our learning on the topic of restricted space.

So, the why of the Community Engagement Guidelines?

Let's go back to 2016. In the spring of that year, resolutions on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace were adopted unanimously by UN member states in the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council. In these resolutions, Member States affirmed the centrality of partnerships, including with civil society, and recognized that community-level engagement is critical for the UN's work to build and sustain peace.

Then, last year, the Secretary-General in his report on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace called for a more meaningful and systematic approach to partnerships between the UN and civil society through recommending the creation of system-wide community engagement guidelines for peacebuilding and sustaining peace.

This recommendation was the spark for dynamic work that has been ongoing for a year now to conceptualize and develop these guidelines.

Now, the what - what are these guidelines going to be when they come out later this year?

The guidelines will provide guidance to the field level parts of the UN on how to better work with local level civil society to build and sustain peace.

By providing recommendations and sharing examples of best practices to address challenges, the guidelines will be used by UN actors as they work to create or strengthen their own policies and practices for engaging with civil society at the community level.

And lastly the how, which then connects to our issues today.

The how of the process for creating these guidelines has been one of innovation for the UN, and one that my organization has been proud to be a part of.

At the heart of this process has been the recognition of the centrality of inclusivity, and that civil society needs to be included and heard if the UN is going to develop guidance that intends to truly support change in how this body engages with CSOs at a local level.

Firstly, this included the creation of a Joint UN – civil society working group, something which has not been done before on such a process. This working group includes participation across the UN system from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN Women, the Department of Peace Operations, UNDP and is facilitated by the Peacebuilding Support Office. On the civil society side, we've been pleased to be part of this group alongside our partners, the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (or GPPAC) and the International Peace Institute. This working group has then come together since December of last year to work to conceptualize and develop these guidelines.

Secondly, is then how the working group sought to learn and hear from civil society globally on their understanding of peacebuilding and sustaining peace, their experience building peace within their context, and if and how they have worked with the UN on peacebuilding initiatives.

Through a global survey published in all UN languages, and a global online consultation carried out in partnership with Peace Direct and their Platform 4 Dialogue system, the Joint Working Group has been able to include the experiences, perspectives, and insights of hundreds of civil society partners. And with the use of video technology, we were able to carry out of 40 conference discussions to dive even deeper with colleagues in select countries.

This inclusive approach enabled the Joint Working Group to truly learn from the experiences of civil society throughout the world. This includes in how they work to build peace in their contexts, but also what factors are challenging them as they seek to build more peaceful, just and inclusive societies. It also served as an opportunity for further trust building between the UN and civil society. We have heard from countless participants about their appreciation for being included in each step along the way, and seeing the UN reach out in this process. Also, from my experience it has been a truly fascinating to be part of this Joint UN-CSO working group, and to have the ability to be at the table alongside our UN colleagues as an equal part of the team and the process. It's my hope that the different streams of our inclusive approach will then be replicated in other processes, including next steps at a country level.

I have to say that throughout this entire process I have been struck by the honesty of participants to openly and freely share about their experiences – including the difficulties and threats that their organizations face. And I'd like to share a bit of what we heard from colleagues.

The survey asked participants to identify up to three key challenges they face in their work and context. What we found is that from the over 300 respondents, they identified increasing restrictions on civic space as their number two challenge.

For our partners, civic space restriction included:

- Legislative measures to silence the work of civil society, including the targeting of speech, media and movement
- Restrictions to funding, including access to new opportunities and freezing of existing funds
- Inability to access meetings or resources outside of the country
- Military or other repression, including during demonstrations
- And direct targeting of civil society, including human rights defenders

And with this list, it makes me think of the too many unfortunate examples that were shared with us during the consultations that so clearly illustrate the daily experiences of some civil society partners working in restricted environments. Colleagues shared the extreme difficulties that civil society face in some contexts when trying to carry out their work, and when seeking to engage or partner with international actors. We learned about experiences of intimidation and alleged harassment by security officials, at times against women peacebuilders. Colleagues spoke about the inability to easily move within their own country because of security or military check points and that in some instances, when looking to work with international partners they would in fact need to go through multiple check point processes that all too often included intimidation, fatigue and discomfort. We heard about how civil society organizations might be negatively perceived by their government or others in their community if seen to be working with the international partners, and how colleagues then need to consider this when thinking about working with these partners. And overall, we heard about the trauma that these experiences inflict on civil society actors, and the exhaustion that comes from having to endure this time and again.

It's key to note that the challenges of civic space restriction, and the negative impact of conflict and fragility were not confined to a specific country or a region. And these challenges were not sector specific. What we unfortunately found is that, while perhaps more prominent in certain types of contexts, the shrinking of civic space is taking hold globally and needs to be understood both as part of the context of a specific environment but also as a global trend.

The challenge of restricted space for civil society was then one of the topics in focus during a session of the online consultation. The consultation provided an avenue for cross learning and sharing by over 400 participants on how the UN can better understand the experiences of civil society partners facing such restrictions and explore avenues to support the opening of space when possible.

We heard strongly from colleagues about the importance of the UN prioritizing a “do no harm” approach when working in restricted and complex environments. Participants also raised their call for the UN to strive to do more to support partners against reprisals, and for the UN to develop or strengthen conflict sensitive safety and protection protocols.

We in the Joint Working Group listened to our civil society colleagues, and as we’re working on the drafting of the Community Engagement Guidelines, we’re striving to include guidance and recommendations that lift up their experiences and may be able to support the UN as it works with civil society in contexts where the space is ever shrinking.

I’d like to share some of the emerging messages with you, as I hope it then can connect with our broader conversation together on how to un-restrict civic space.

First, there is the identification of the role the UN can play. While the UN is in a country on the invitation of the government, there is the need to also prioritize the safety and protection of community-based peacebuilding partners. This requires a conflict sensitive and ‘do no harm’ approach, and efforts to promote a safe and enabling civic space, including through promoting, protecting and expanding space for civic engagement.

Second, there is the need to clearly understand and assess the context – including the safety and experiences of civil society that UN actors are engaging with. To do this, UN colleagues can carry out a contextual mapping and analysis process that includes consideration of the challenges and risks experienced by civil society in the environment. Such risks need to be continually assessed and inform UN programming.

Third, UN colleagues should be fully mindful that working with or being perceived to work with the UN can itself put civil society partners at risk. So, steps need to be taken to ensure that any outreach and engagement, regardless of good intentions, is conflict and risk sensitive, and does not lead to any harm. This may require the creation of safety and security protocols for the UN’s civil society engagement.

And lastly, ongoing training of UN staff is essential. Colleagues will benefit from conflict-sensitive training, as well as trainings on the role and impact of civil society within the context that they’re working on.

I also want to briefly share a few messages around the role of civil society itself, and how together we may also be able to contribute to efforts to support our colleagues working in restricted spaces.

While the Community Engagement Guidelines are guidance for the UN, we received many great insights from civil society participants in the consultation processes on the topic of what other CSOs can do.

I’d like to highlight two relevant points.

First, is a call for civil society organizations to explore more opportunities for cross regional or international exchanges, especially with local and grassroots civil society in conflict-affected countries. Through such exchanges civil society actors can expand and strengthen their partnerships and networks across borders. Participants can come together to share good practices on building peace, explore avenues to enhance civil society capacities, and develop joint strategies for peacebuilding and sustaining peace. This can include a focus on topics like civic space restriction, which can provide colleagues with a greater sense of community and support.

And second is a call to international civil society organizations – those groups, like QUNO, working at places of policy development and power, or working on a global peacebuilding scale. And the call here is to continue to strategically advocate for partners, including in a conflict informed and sensitive way; to uplift their voices in these spaces and support their participation and representation in decision making processes.

We have a role to play and a responsibility to support our partners who are facing these restrictions head on day in and day out, with strength and bravery.

Thank you again for the space to share this work. I look forward to our conversation, and I'd greatly appreciate learning from you about your experiences working in or with partners in restricted environments. What strategies or approaches have you found allows for your peacebuilding work to continue? What examples of best practices or challenges can you share that can still inform the development of these guidelines? What do you think we – as civil society – can do more of to uplift one another in this increasingly restricted global environment?

Thank you.