



QUNO
Quaker United Nations Office

Religious actors, local peacebuilding, gender and extremism

QUNO remarks at a UN event co-hosted by the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding and the Permanent Observer Mission of the OIC: “Turning the Tide: Engaging Religiously-Motivated Peacebuilders in Conflict Zones” on July 13, 2016.

My thanks to the organizers and to my fellow speakers. I feel privileged to be here with this extraordinary group of peacemakers, women and men who have devoted themselves to this work in their own countries.

Introduction

I am here today representing the Quaker office at the United Nations, which has been in New York accompanying delegates and officials since the founding of the UN. In New York, QUNO focuses on Peacebuilding and the Prevention of Violent Conflict, and it is from a peacebuilding perspective on religion, violence and extremism that I would like to speak with you today.

QUNO works at a policy level, but our work is rooted in the lived experience of those impacted by violence and fragility around the world, particularly through the peacebuilding work of our sister organization, the American Friends Service Committee, in communities in 15 countries around the world– including the United States.

In our work, we convene peacebuilding organizations, we uphold local voices and perspectives, and we bring the latest experience of peacebuilding practitioners and academics to inform UN policy making.

Summary

I have three main points to make today:

- I. community level peacemaking by religious actors connects directly to the heart of peacebuilding and the prevention of violent conflict – strengthening the social fabric, the relationship between individuals, communities and their governments

- II. the international community can support this work by doing better analysis, following “do no harm” approaches, and connecting short term external response to longer term planning for local peaceful, just and inclusive societies
- III. above all, the international community need to be mobilized as a matter of urgency to reverse the shrinking of civil society space around the world.

The heart of peacebuilding

At its core, peacebuilding is about strengthening the social fabric from the bottom up – building up the relationships between people, communities and their government. It's a long term process, it's based on establishing trust, and it's the surest way we know to create sustainable resilience in a society. In the same way that you cannot successfully impose elections on a society where there is a lack of political dialogue, you cannot impose institutions on a society where the social contract has yet to be negotiated – this is a process that is intrinsically local and has to be built from the bottom up.

When we consider societies affected by instability and violent conflict, where government capacity may be very weak, religious institutions and individuals are frequently a core part of what remains of the social fabric, of the glue that holds society together, that provides basic services and dispute resolution. Whether we're comfortable with it or not, religious and traditional actors may have a particular legitimacy in their own societies, and are often motivated to build peace, as we have heard this morning.

The Secretary-General's Global Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism notes that “the creation of open, equitable, inclusive and pluralist societies, based on the full respect of human rights and with economic opportunities for all, represents the most tangible and meaningful alternative to violent extremism and the most promising strategy for rendering it unattractive”. In turn, this connects to the most transformative part of the 2030 agenda, the mandate to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies – and this approach in turn finds its echoes in the “sustaining peace” resolutions of April 27th.

So, while there may be a new focus on the community level work of religious and traditional actors as a result of the recent upsurge in politicized and organized violence, the reality is that this is work that has always been going on, and has always been connected to the heart of peacebuilding

Support from the international community

So how can the international community support this kind of local level peacebuilding?

One part of the answer is simply about doing better analysis. Include local civil society, women and youth and religious organizations in your assessment. Pay attention not only to the factors that may be driving violence, but also the factors that are positive, that are holding things together and which contribute to peace. Listen to governments, but listen to others as well, and get out of the capital.

Another part of the answer is to ensure that all actions by the international community, even those at times of crisis, even those in response to threats to peace and security, are connected to a long term strategy to support the development of peaceful and inclusive societies. There always has to be a longer term vision – and the 2030 Agenda provides not a bad starting point.

It's also always important to not lose track of a human rights perspective (including economic, social and cultural rights) – which is what the UN's Human Rights Up Front policy is all about – and to be persistent about abuse, corruption and bad governance

And finally, it's vital to follow the 'do no harm' imperative. When instability is localized, this can be easier to do – but when the security interests of external actors get involved, there's a real risk of prioritizing external security over local needs and perspectives.

Gender perspective – challenges and opportunities

Our chair today requested that we reflect on the gender perspectives of this discussion, and it is notable that the large majority of the religiously-motivated peacemakers with us here today are women.

Adopting a gender lens as we consider local level peacebuilding work can be transformative in a number of ways.

First, societies emerging from violent conflict have a choice as to whether to look backward, seeking to recreate the social dispensation that existed pre-conflict, or to look forward, working for a more transformative set of social changes that better address the needs of a peaceful, just and inclusive ordering. Using a gender lens in most cases shifts the balance of planning and action towards a more transformative approach which includes a shift towards greater social, economic and political inclusion of women and girls.

Secondly, it has sometimes been suggested that there may be a tension between human rights and peacebuilding, and that local level peace work may require a more pragmatic approach. However, once a gender lens is applied, then using a human rights framing (including economic, social and cultural rights) becomes a necessity in order to discern a way forward. Other frameworks broadly agreed by member states, such as the 2030 Agenda, are also important in this regard.

Nevertheless, there remains an ongoing challenge in how to both be true to the gender imperative and yet make common cause with broader issues of economic, social and political inclusion. It is still the case that gender issues tend to be silo'd within policy conversations at a global level and operationally.

Reverse shrinking civil society space

But the greatest threat to community level peacebuilding is the rapid shrinking of civil society space all over the world. Too many governments have been clamping down on civil society in their own countries and internationally in the name of 'counter-terrorism'. Just and peaceful societies that are resilient in the face of external stress need more inclusion, not less. At the very least, it is important for the UN itself to model approaches in missions and country teams that support and expand existing mechanisms for community engagement and to encourage their government counterparts to do the same.

Conclusion

To conclude:

- I. community level peacemaking by religious actors connects directly to the heart of peacebuilding and the prevention of violent conflict –
- II. the international community can support this work by doing better analysis, following “do no harm” approaches, and connecting short term external response to longer term planning for local peaceful, just and inclusive societies
- III. above all, the international community need to be mobilized to reverse the shrinking of civil society space around the world.

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