

Prevention and sustaining peace: human rights in action

Event report - Tuesday 3rd November 2020

The side event jointly organized by the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation (DHF), Quaker United Nations Office - Geneva (QUNO) and the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reaffirmed the intrinsic links between human rights and peacebuilding; and highlighted how human rights can contribute to preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of crisis and conflict – making the case for greater coherence across the UN's three pillars.

Discussants outlined important policy processes that have advanced this agenda, including Human Rights Council (HRC) resolutions [38/18 \(2018\)](#) and more recently [45/31 \(2020\)](#) on 'The contribution of the Human Rights Council to the prevention of human rights violations', which calls for a strengthening of UN human rights early warning and action capacity, and formalizes institutional collaboration among UN bodies with closer linkages between the human rights and peace and security pillars on prevention. Other policy milestones mentioned were the [Secretary General's Call to Action for Human Rights](#) which was made as the world was starting to grasp the severity of the global pandemic, and the [2020 Peacebuilding Architecture Review \(PBAR\)](#) which discussants hoped would result in an outcome that contributes to strengthened system-wide coherence on sustaining peace efforts.

The need to continue raising awareness of Human Rights mechanisms and their relevance across all of the UN's work was highlighted as critical. While the Universal Periodic Review Process (UPR) was noted as having received more recognition in recent years for its potential to contribute to peacebuilding and prevention, Special Procedures and Treaty bodies also hold great potential in this regard that should be further explored.

Focusing on activities at the country level, concrete examples were provided about the value of using human rights analysis, tools and approaches throughout all phases of conflict. In particular, discussants highlighted how monitoring and reporting human rights violations contributes to protection mapping, thus anticipating potential deterioration of a situation or preventing recurrence. For instance, data on election-related violence recorded in the integrated prevention platform in one country situation facilitated an early warning analysis of root causes and resulted in the development of a comprehensive UN prevention strategy. In an example from another context, OHCHR and UN partners supported victims' associations, women and youth groups to engage in transitional justice processes, which informed the work of a Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission and a nascent reparations programme. The importance of stronger engagement with local actors, as well as the roles and responsibilities of empowered UN Resident Coordinators was seen as instrumental in enabling better analysis and in the identification of possible risks and threats of crisis and conflicts.

However, gaps were also highlighted both at the policy and implementation levels. The ongoing challenges in integrating human rights into peacebuilding and sustaining peace efforts, including in the work of the Peacebuilding Architecture, and continued fragmentation in the UN system were cited, along with remaining misconceptions about the meaning of 'prevention' (structural prevention such as longer-term institution-building all the way to direct operational prevention such as through mediation, public diplomacy etc.) in theory and in practice. The difficult balancing act that the UN faces in maintaining access to communities and governments while also speaking out on Human Rights principles such as universality, indivisibility and interdependence was also mentioned as an ongoing challenge.

Bifurcated funding was highlighted as undermining cooperative and integrated programming for justice and peacebuilding. It was also noted that in many contexts today, the state is as much part of the problem as it is the solution, and was considered as challenging as the lack of political will to act despite sufficient early warning and analysis made available to do so.

The conversation also focused on the importance of partnerships, an essential part of the puzzle for ensuring system-wide coherence and joint work based on the common understanding of crises. Calls were made for building stronger relationships with civil society and local actors as well as with regional organisations and International Financial Institutions, with an initiative between OHCHR, the African Union and the World Bank highlighted as a positive example. The role of the private sector, including big technology companies, in prevention was particularly highlighted given the impact of misinformation, hate speech and incitement to violence in driving crisis and conflict.

Bringing the conversation to a close – the impact of COVID-19 on longstanding structural inequalities and other contemporary drivers of conflict pushed into the limelight the need to redefine threats to international security - a challenge for the sustaining peace agenda.

How do we meaningfully engage in prevention in the face of these new realities?

Moderator:

Florence Foster, *Quaker United Nations Office*

Speakers:

- Ilze Brands Kehris - *Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights*
- Jurg Lauber - *Ambassador to the UN for Switzerland here in Geneva*
- Marcel Akpovo - *UN Human Rights/OHCHR Regional Representative for East Africa and to the African Union*
- Dr. Tatiana Carayannis - *Program Director, Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, Social Science Research Council*

This event took place as part of Geneva Peace Week (GPW) 2020. **Many thanks to the organizing team of GPW - from DHF, QUNO and OHCHR**

