



QUNO

Quaker United Nations Office

**Global Virtual Launch:
UN System-wide Community Engagement Guidelines**

*Delivered by: Megan Schmidt, Quaker UN Representative
28 January 2021*

Hello everyone. My name is Megan Schmidt, and I am the Quaker UN Representative for the Peacebuilding Program at the Quaker UN Office, or QUNO, based in New York. I have worked for over two years now as a member of the Joint UN-Civil Society Working Group to develop the Community Engagement Guidelines and am excited to speak with all of you today.

Why QUNO saw the creation of System-wide Community Engagement Guidelines as necessary and valuable

To start, I'd like to reflect on why QUNO saw the creation of the Guidelines as necessary and valuable for the system and its work to build and sustain peace.

The issue of inclusion is central for us at QUNO. We see civil society as key to the social fabric needed for building and sustaining peace, that organizations and communities can have a positive impact for peacebuilding. And often, in conflict affected societies and particularly situations of transition or extreme fragility, these actors may be the primary peacebuilding agents. They are the ones with localized expertise from long-term engagement in a community or country, an expertise that is all too often missing from policy discussions. Thus, building or strengthening partnerships and engagement between the UN and communities in a meaningful and transparent manner grounded in equality and safety will enhance our shared and collective efforts to build and sustain peace.

So, when reading the recommendation by the Secretary-General to create system-wide guidance, we saw this as a valuable opportunity for the United Nations as a whole to develop and implement a tool that can support partnership and engagement for peacebuilding and sustaining peace. We then welcomed the opportunity to work with UN colleagues at the headquarters level to develop the process for drafting and rolling out the guidance.

Working methods to create the Community Engagement Guidelines: Inclusion at the heart

I'd like to reflect on how the Community Engagement Guidelines were developed, and the working methods that the UN-Civil Society Working Group employed. In many ways, we sought to embody through our approach the goals we were seeking – to foster inclusion and partnership.

At the heart of this process has been the recognition that the voices and experiences of UN colleagues from the field and civil society need to be heard if the UN is going to develop guidance that supports how it engages with communities.

First, this included the creation of the Joint UN – civil society working group, which included participation across the UN system from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN Women, the Department of Peace Operations, UNDP and was 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 and the International Peace Institute. This working group has worked together since December of 2018 to conceptualize and develop these guidelines.

Second, is how the working group sought to learn and hear from UN and civil society actors globally on their understanding of peacebuilding and sustaining peace, their experience building peace within their context, and if and how they have worked together on peacebuilding initiatives. Through a global survey published in all UN languages, and a global online consultation carried out in partnership with Peace Direct, the Joint Working Group was able to include the experiences, perspectives, and insights of hundreds of colleagues. And with the use of video technology, we carried out of over 40 conference discussions to dive even deeper with colleagues in select countries.

This inclusive approach enabled the Joint Working Group to truly learn from experiences, best practices and challenges faced by colleagues throughout the world as they seek to build more peaceful, just and inclusive societies. I have to say also that throughout this entire process I have been struck by the honesty of participants to openly and freely share about their experiences and continue to be appreciative of the time invested by so many in this process.

The outcome: 7 Recommendations and a dozen country examples to support UN practice

I'd like to now focus the remainder on the Guidelines themselves which include seven key recommendations and a dozen country examples to support UN practice at the field level.

The recommendations were developed, and examples identified through the consultation process which directly shaped the first draft. A whole of UN approach was also taken at strategic times— with offices and programmes outside of the Working Group providing their expertise and consideration to various drafts, ultimately strengthening the final document and sensitizing colleagues to its development.

Through the country examples we sought to illustrate the breadth of ways that UN colleagues are already working with civil society and communities and share the learning from these experiences.

The recommendations provide support both in working methods – so the principles that should inform community engagement – as well as the practical measures to develop or enhance partnership. They should be seen as additional tools to support developing new approaches or building upon existing efforts for community engagement, specifically through a sustaining peace lens.

The main recommendations include:

1. Deeper understanding of local context through respectful, coherent and flexible engagement
2. Operational and strategic coherence and effective coordination in community engagement across the UN in the field
3. Safety and protection in restricted environments through conflict sensitive and risk informed approaches
4. Inclusive and meaningful participation of local civil society actors
5. Community-based capacity-building, including financing for peacebuilding
6. Meaningful participation of local women and women civil society actors in peacebuilding and sustaining peace
7. Meaningful youth engagement in peacebuilding and sustaining peace at the local level

I'd like to now share my reflections with you on what I find meaningful about the recommendations.



QUNO

Quaker United Nations Office

First, relates to the principles that you will see throughout this document. I believe these principles can be found in the language used – words including: respect; people-centered; locally-led; meaningful; encouragement; and full understanding. The very first recommendation itself is grounded in the recognition that respect must be at the heart of all interactions. UN colleagues so often carry out their work with these principles in mind, but through including them in the very foundation of this guidance it is my hope that the Guidelines will further support UN efforts to work in a principled and peaceful manner – embodying the change we all hope to see in the world.

Second, I want to bring your attention to the emphasis on UN coherence. Whether its regarding analysis, financing, outreach or partnership development, you will find recommendations and examples that illustrate the importance of centralized and streamlined approaches. Additionally, attention is given to the importance of flexibility, ensuring adequate capacity, and coordinating throughout UN country settings to support a whole of UN approach for engagement. This emphasis on coherence supports the ongoing reform efforts to strengthen the UN’s capacities, and also contributes to the implementation of the peacebuilding and sustaining peace resolutions which draw attention to the need for coherent system-wide efforts.

Lastly, I want to take time to focus on the practical approaches and examples identified in the guidance. Through the seven recommendations you’ll find information around a range of practical measures that can be taken when seeking to build or strengthen community engagement. This includes, but is not limited to, an emphasis on:

- Developing and carrying out contextual and conflict sensitive guidance for engagement
- Conducting various mappings of civil society and their contributions to peacebuilding and sustaining peace
- The need for gender sensitive measures and funding models to sustain the work of women-led peacebuilding efforts
- The importance of an increase in operational and financial sustainability for youth-led peacebuilding
- And the need for predictable, flexible and risk tolerant funding for peacebuilding

It is my hope that the Guidelines will provide UN staff with new ideas, approaches or tools that, when contextualized for the environment they operate in, will be able to support them in developing or enhancing efforts for community engagement. These Guidelines are a tool to contribute to the UN’s global work, and I hope that colleagues working at the field level find value in this document as you seek to take its words into practice in your daily efforts to build and sustain peace.

Thank you.