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Quaker United Nations Office

The UN's role in maintaining international order: preventing violent conflict and fostering peaceful and inclusive societies.

Presentation given at the International Seminar on the 70th Anniversary of the United Nations "The Seventy Years of UN: Mission, Responsibility and Future", Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, Beijing, 20-21 July 2015.

Good Morning. My thanks go to the organizers of this conference and to my distinguished fellow speakers. I am privileged to have been invited to speak to you today, and I look forward to listening and learning from your perspectives.

Introduction

The Quaker UN Office has been at the UN since 1947 – that is to say, longer than many member states. Over almost 70 years, in New York and Geneva, we have focused on issues of peace and justice, bringing outside voices and local perspectives to decision makers at the UN, and acting to convene and facilitate discussions among diplomats, UN officials, and civil society representatives. We work at all levels: for example, in March we coordinated civil society input into the peace operations and peacebuilding reviews, bringing local civil society representatives from Africa and beyond to New York to interact with panel members and submit a list of recommendations. And over recent weeks, as part of the NGO Working Group on Israel Palestine, we have been working with the Malaysian and Jordanian missions on an Arrria formula meeting of the security council on the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza.

An emerging consensus on the need for a new focus on preventing violent conflict

2015 is turning out to be a rather extraordinary year for the United Nations. Not only is it the 70th anniversary of the signing of the charter, but we are faced with an unprecedented number of significant UN-based negotiations and processes that together will frame the work of multilateralism for the next decade, from development to climate change, from global governance to humanitarian action and disaster relief, and from economic dispensations to peacebuilding and the prevention of violent conflict.

We're now about half way through, with the open working group process completed and the SDG discussions well advanced, Sendai behind us and the reports of the high-level panels on peace operations and the peacebuilding architecture in hand, the 1325 review well under way and with the outcome document of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development in Addis fresh off the presses. Looking ahead, we still have the Special Summit in September, the Climate Change Conference and the World Humanitarian Summit to come.

One of the significant shifts that is starting to become visible is the centrality to so many of these discussions of the imperative for the international community to find better ways of supporting the needs of societies affected by violent conflict and institutional frailty. To name just a few of the places where this is coming up:

- In the context of the post-2015 and related *development* conversations, research has shown that the effort to eliminate extreme poverty must of necessity address the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies. By 2030, countries affected by conflict, exclusion and lower institutional capacity will be home to the majority of people living on less than USD 1.25 a day. These are the environments where existing MDG approaches have failed to bring either peace or development, and currently ODA flows are not reaching the right countries or the right sectors to build peace.
- In the *humanitarian* space, well over half of those in need of humanitarian assistance worldwide have been impacted by conflict, whether as IDPs or refugees or as a result of economic and political disruption. The growing emphasis among those working on humanitarian issues and disaster relief is on fostering resilience, and that approach is increasingly reflecting lessons learned from work by peacebuilders and others in conflict-affected areas on strengthening the fabric of society, and is leading to a greater emphasis on prevention.
- Within *peace and security* discussions, the report of the High Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations has stressed the need to shift resources and attention to conflict prevention, particularly through emphasizing political solutions and linking peace operations to sustained efforts to build peace. The report of the Advisory Group of Experts on the UN Peacebuilding Architecture has focused on the need for a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to addressing the drivers of conflict. Even within the context of terrorism, we are seeing the UN's approach being framed as prevention.

Putting all these pieces together, the message is coming across that if we don't find better ways of engaging with the root causes of conflict, both within countries and systemically, then the grand ambitions of this year's many multilateral processes will stand little chance of materializing.

Which brings us to my thesis today, which is that when it comes to the issue of the UN's role in maintaining international order, the topic of this morning's session, the sweet spot and perhaps the area of the UN's greatest comparative advantage, is in taking the lead on coordinating efforts to prevent violent conflict and foster the growth of peaceful, resilient and inclusive societies supported by a just and effective system of global governance. And that this perspective requires us to think well beyond security-based approaches and to address root causes.

Prevention of Violent Conflict: UN perspectives, lessons learned

This is of course not the first time that the UN has focused on prevention. 10 years ago, Heads of States and Government, gathered in New York for the 2005 World Summit, committed to "promote a culture of prevention of armed conflict as a means of effectively addressing the interconnected security and development challenges faced by peoples throughout the world". Part of the background to this was a growing sense that something was needed to complement the crisis response mechanisms that had proven inadequate to the task over the preceding decade. As the Secretary General noted in his 2006 report: "...the thrust of preventive work must shift...from reactive, external interventions with ultimately superficial impact to internally driven initiatives for developing local and national capacities".

Now, 20 years later, the world seems a more complicated place. Increasingly we are faced with violent conflicts that have no clear beginning and end, few geographical limits, and little distinction between combatants and civilians, where the lines are blurred between political, criminal and ideological motivations, and where the conventional conflict cycle has little or no meaning. In this

changing context, the traditional allocation of UN and donor resources, still heavily weighted to last-minute crisis response, seems increasingly misplaced.

Our understanding of violent conflict and its inter-connectedness with broader development and humanitarian issues has grown, reinforced by significant research studies, such as the World Development Report of 2011 on “Conflict, Security and Development”, (which noted that the MDG approach had been largely unsuccessful in conflict-affected countries, and that the process of rebuilding for such societies could take generations) and the Institute for Economics and Peace 2013 study on the “Pillars of Peace: Understanding the key attitudes and institutions that underpin peaceful societies”, (which highlighted the central role of tolerance and inclusion).

Additionally, we have heard the voices of conflict-affected countries themselves, with the articulation by the g7+ group, currently chaired by Sierra Leone, of their experience of what it takes to do development in conflict-affected environments. Their list of Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals is salutary, ranking issues such as legitimate politics, people’s security and access to justice at the same level of importance as economic foundations and revenues and services. The emphasis on the attention that has to be paid to the human side of prevention also comes through strongly in the Peace Operations Review: “Lasting peace is achieved not through military and technical engagements, but through political solutions” and even in the context of preventing violent extremism, the Secretary General stated in February that “good governance kills terrorism: human rights, accountable institutions, the equitable delivery of services and political participation – these are among our most powerful weapons.”

Prevention is of course not just about actions taken in support of increasing resilience within countries by focusing on issues such as reconciliation, inclusion (including that of women) and good governance, which address *internal* factors. It is also about actions taken in the international and multilateral arena, addressing the *external* factors that can contribute to state weakness and susceptibility to violence, that can overwhelm the domestic resources of small and even medium sized countries. The Secretary-General’s progress report on the Prevention of Armed Conflict in 2006 introduced the concept of *systemic* prevention, measures that address global risk factors for conflictual violence, a list that can include everything from irresponsible arms flows and transnational criminal activity, to migration and the impact of climate change, to the disruptive effects of illicit commercial exploitation and the trade and security agendas of external actors. In this context, it has been interesting to see that the list of sustainable development goal candidates included in the final draft of the outcome document for the UN Summit in September goes some way towards articulating the need to address these external factors, including targets on international rule of law, illicit financial flows, and so on.

What needs to change?

If we accept the premise that the keystone of the UN’s work, across development, humanitarian action and peace and security, needs to be to foster the growth of peaceful, resilient and inclusive societies, supported by a just and effective system of global governance, then what changes need to take place - what do we need to do differently?

An initial step that could take us a long way would be to use a *preventive lens* for all development, humanitarian, security and indeed commercial initiatives, both at the UN and beyond. This could include the following:

- 1) Always seek to understand the *context*: an effective and inclusive context analysis, involving a variety of local perspectives, should be a prerequisite for any external engagement
- 2) In the planning and implementation of development, humanitarian, economic or security engagement, always seek to *do no harm*, to ensure that unintentionally or otherwise, the consequences of that engagement do not themselves make things worse, for example by affirming existing patterns of political or economic exclusion
- 3) Prioritize addressing *local needs*, the longer term support for peaceful, resilient and inclusive communities, over external self-interested agendas, particularly short-term security or stabilization objectives
- 4) Focus on increasing *resilience*, particularly emphasizing the relationship between individuals, their communities and their government, reconciliation, and societies' capacity to build dialogue and to make inclusive and collaborative decisions

Conclusion

To summarize:

- a core message emerging from many of this year's UN-based processes, across the spectrum from development and humanitarian action to peace and security, is that we need to find better ways of *engaging with the root causes of violent conflict*, both within countries and systemically
- when it comes to the issue of the UN's role in maintaining international order, the area of the UN's greatest comparative advantage is in taking the lead on coordinating efforts to prevent violent conflict by *fostering the growth of peaceful, resilient and inclusive societies supported by a just and effective system of global governance*
- as an initial step, we can choose to *adopt a preventive lens* to all our development, humanitarian, economic and security engagements that seek to understand the context, do no harm, prioritize local needs over external agendas and focus on building resilience

Above all, let us embrace the *universality* articulated in the outcome document for the UN Summit in September, that our task is not complete until all human beings, wherever they may live, can fulfil their potential.

Thank you.

Andrew Tomlinson

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