



Quaker United Nations Office

“Putting the Pieces Together:

Towards a Unified Approach to Prevention at the UN”.

Quaker United Nations Office, New York (QUNO), presentation at a seminar hosted by the United Nations Office at Geneva and the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform on 15th June, 2012: *“20 Years of ‘An Agenda for Peace’: A New Vision for Conflict Prevention?”*

Director General, Ambassador, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

My thanks to our hosts and organizers, and for the very interesting contributions of my fellow panelists.

A New Beginning for the United Nations

The ‘Agenda for Peace’ came at an extraordinary moment in UN history. The cold war had come to an end: over the prior two years, Soviet forces had withdrawn from Afghanistan, the Berlin Wall had come down and the START I treaty had been signed. The USSR had been officially dissolved in December 1991. That year had also seen a group of Member States authorized by the Security Council to act on its behalf in response to the invasion of Kuwait, as well as the beginning of the dismantling of the apartheid system in South Africa. The president’s note from the Security Council meeting on 31st January, the first ever to be held at the level of Heads of State and Government, (and the source of the request to the Secretary General for a new report on preventive diplomacy, peace-making and peacekeeping), is almost euphoric: “The members of the Council agree that the world now has the best chance of achieving international peace and security since the foundation of the United Nations” (S23500).

An extraordinary sense of excitement and opportunity springs out of these documents, as well as a feeling of urgency. Not only was the report delivered in 5 months: those months saw significant changes at the UN, including a major reorganization of the secretariat that created the Department of Political Affairs and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations from a number of existing units. So the first half of 1992 saw a resetting of both the normative and the organizational framing of the peace & security apparatus of the UN which largely remains with us today.

‘Peace by Numbers’

The report itself was innovative in a number of aspects, notable among them the introduction of the concept of peacebuilding to the UN lexicon, (although it is interesting to note that the concept of

peacebuilding described in the report includes not only post-conflict reconstruction, but also rebuilding relations between nations formerly at war). There is a sense of confidence in an understanding of conflict as sequential and that, with the addition of peacebuilding, the UN now had a toolkit to address every stage in that conflict sequence. Moreover, now that the political constraints of the cold war had ended, all that remained was for the UN to go out and apply those tools:

“ [The United Nations] security arm, once disabled by circumstances it was not created or equipped to control [i.e. the Cold War], has emerged as a central instrument for the prevention and resolution of conflicts and for the preservation of peace. Our aims must be:

- To seek to identify at the earliest possible stage situations that could produce conflict and try through *diplomacy* to remove the source of danger...
- Where conflict erupts, to engage in *peacemaking* aimed at resolving the issues...
- Through *peacekeeping*, to work to preserve peace...where fighting has been halted and to assist in implementing agreements achieved by the peacemakers..
- To stand ready to assist in *peace-building* ... rebuilding the institutions and infrastructures of nations torn by civil war and strife...”

This sequence, of preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding was to be the core of an orderly and rational approach to conflict: as the report states, “These four areas of action, taken together, and carried out with the backing of all Members, offer a coherent contribution towards securing peace in the spirit of the Charter”. (para. 22). It should also be noted that this approach was very much top-down and extrinsic, a to-do list for the international community, not a recommendation for local actors.

10 Years Later – Starting the Shift from Response to Prevention

Ten years later, in the Secretary General’s 2001 report on Prevention of Armed Conflict, in the wake of Rwanda and Srebrenica, the mood was very different, and the feeling was growing that something was needed to complement the crisis response mechanisms that had proven inadequate to the task: “...the time has come to intensify our efforts to move from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention”. By 2006, the Progress Report on Prevention of Armed Conflict was even clearer: “...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 for prevention”.

The 2001 report was also more explicit about the limitations to UN action, noting that that the primary responsibility for conflict prevention rested with national governments, and that other actors, including regional organizations and, in particular, civil society, had significant roles to play. Indeed, the 2001 report provided one of the more extensive discussions in formal UN documents of the roles that civil society can play in these contexts: “...NGOs can...offer non-violent avenues for addressing the root causes of conflict...conduct Track II diplomacy...provide studies of early warning and response opportunities...and can act as advocates in raising international consciousness of particular situations”. Nevertheless, the framing of the issue was still a conflict cycle, with

prevention being the first stage of action – “Preventive action should be initiated at the earliest possible stage of a conflict cycle in order to be most effective”.

20 Years Later – A Growing Understanding of Conflict and Complexity

20 years later, the world seems a more complicated place, and the traditional allocation of UN and donor resources, still heavily weighted to last-minute crisis response and to inter- and intra-state conflict, seems increasingly misplaced. Our understanding of violent conflict has grown, as detailed in analyses such as the 2011 World Development Report. Looking at the world today, it is becoming clear that violent conflict is neither sequential, nor time-bound, nor limited by borders. The analysis produced as part of the Geneva Declaration process, showing that violent deaths in non-conflict settings outnumber those in conflict settings by 10 to 1 is just one, graphic example of how much our perspective on the problem has changed. Any analysis of violent conflict today, and any set of responses, has to encompass a wide variety of situations including:

- Violent instability as a result of the impact of local and cross-border organized crime,
- Urban violence, as the pace of urbanization continues to accelerate,
- Deep and rapid political change as societies transform themselves after decades of stasis,
- Violent conflict arising from deep, long term divisions, often based on longstanding issues such as land disputes, and often exacerbated by political rivalries,
- The negative impact on fragile governments of a growing list of external stress factors, from the continuing economic crisis to the effects of climate change,
- Distortion of local priorities driven by the perceived security needs of other actors.

Conflict and fragility are no longer issues that only affect low-income societies, if they ever were, and although violence and instability can contribute to poverty and chronic under-development, poverty does not necessarily lead to violence and development is not necessarily the primary answer to breaking cycles of conflict. Rather, what has become clear, and is now being articulated even by the most fragile and conflict-affected countries themselves, (in the form of the New Deal, for example), is that preventing violent conflict requires building or rebuilding sustainable relationships between individuals, communities and their governments. Even for these, the hardest situations, we see the 2011 Peacebuilding and Statebuilding goals (as set out in the New Deal) emphasize issues of political dialogue, people’s security and accessible justice as much as they emphasize economic issues or service delivery.

Even where the threats and stresses are external, a society that has resilience, that has strengthened its capacity to build dialogue and to make inclusive and collaborative decisions, will be more robust and resistant to breakdown than one that has not. There will always be a need for an effective response mechanism, but currently the balance between the resources devoted to response, and those devoted to developing local preventive capacities, is still far too heavily weighted towards response.

A Developing Toolkit: Flexibility & Adaptation

Interestingly, many parts of the UN system have adapted to this new reality, although in some cases progress has occurred in spite of the broader UN architecture rather than because of it. On the ground, UN actors have been finding ways to assist countries and communities in developing their own capacity to negotiate collaborative and inclusive outcomes, through programmes such as the joint UNDP-DPA programme for Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention, which deploys Peace & Development Advisors to assist national actors, at their request, in nearly 30 countries. We are also increasingly seeing UN Peacekeeping missions taking on an explicit conflict prevention role, as in South Sudan. The need to begin to address prevention issues on a regional basis has led to the establishment of three regional political missions. New funding mechanisms are being developed, like the Peacebuilding Fund which provides catalytic funding to meet urgent needs with a short turnaround.

At a member state level, we are seeing a new openness to cooperation with regional organizations, the development of organizational structures such as the Peacebuilding Commission, (with its potential for peer support through political accompaniment and South-South exchanges), and the development of peer review mechanisms, like the Universal Periodic Review and the African Peer Review Mechanism, opening up new directions in mutual support and accountability. Moreover, there is now a wide range of preventive activity that takes place across the UN system, from the work on violence as a health issue at the WHO, to the various processes around Armed Violence and Development, including the Geneva Declaration, to the development of the Rapporteur system and the joint office of the Special Advisers, to name only a few such initiatives.

Nevertheless, it should be clear that many of these advances have been made in isolation: the UN system is far from adopting a unified approach to prevention issues, or even a common understanding of how all these pieces can work together. There is also still a leaning towards top-down and government-centric processes, and the UN still has to develop better mechanisms for broad consultation with civil society and others on the ground, outside the elites and beyond the capital. And the formal organization of the UN machinery still largely follows the fourfold ‘prevention by numbers’ approach of the ‘Agenda for Peace’: preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

Next Steps: Putting the Pieces Together

In considering a way forward, several issues present themselves:

There is a real need for a single unifying analytical and conceptual framework for prevention, response and peacebuilding at the UN, that would replace the sequential conflict cycle paradigm and would bridge the divides that still beset this discussion, between security and development, between crisis response and capacity building, and would encompass our new conception of violence in a variety of environments. This should, however, be a tool for communication rather than a prescriptive device: work on the ground still needs to be driven by iterative, evidence-based processes rather than as the top-down implementation of a framework or theory.

Once consensus has been built around such a framework, the next logical step would be to create a new UN strategy that would line up member states’ and the UN’s resources and organizational structures and processes behind a unifying vision. In practical terms, however, it will take some time

to build the kind of consensus that would be necessary to frame such a strategy. Rather, in the near term, I would suggest that there are three things that could usefully take place:

- Sustained attention from researchers, think-tanks and thought-leaders on the challenges presented by this new, broader perspective on violence, matched by continuing experimentation on the ground to identify what works and what doesn't; (we may find that what we learn in non-traditional contexts may usefully inform violence prevention in conflict affected environments),
- A continuing shift in donor attention towards programmes and approaches that are targeted at assisting societies to build preventive capacity: and most importantly,
- Increasing leadership from societies that are impacted by violence, in articulating their needs, sharing experience and lessons learned, and looking pro-actively and where appropriate for support from the international community for their own efforts.

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