

Peace-making and the prevention of violence: The role of governments and non-governmental organizations

by
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WE are living through a time of uniquely contradictory trends. The post-Cold-War era may be summed up for many by one sentence: there is less immediate threat, but much more insecurity than ever before. We no longer fear a superpower-driven Third World War, but are increasingly concerned with growing social tension and conflict, not to speak of the environmental crises which are looming on the horizon.

The paradoxes and contrasts of our time are manifold:

- fewer international wars, but more internal strife than previously;
- more democracies, but also more weak States with power vacuums breeding anti-democratic movements;
- more international cooperation, but also more aggressive nationalism and xenophobia;
- a declining number of international refugees, but more displaced people than ever before; and
- more rich and affluent people than ever before, especially in Latin America and Asia, but also more people living in abject poverty at a time when there is less international assistance available for the growing number of vulnerable societies in need of aid.

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In the 1990s, conflict, violence, arms proliferation and internal strife are the most serious obstacles to development and equitable economic growth, and are also the cause and the consequence of social injustice.

It is against this background that we have to discuss new forms of partnership whereby intergovernmental organizations, individual governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) collectively rise to the challenges posed by violence, complex emergencies and intra-State conflicts. Whereas during much of the Cold War period governments, United Nations agencies, development banks and NGOs tended to pursue separate paths and strategies in attempting to alleviate the effects of conflicts, the new trend is for an integrated, holistic approach, combining a multiplicity of methods. There is increasing recognition that the sources of violence and social strife are complex and multifaceted, and call for a cooperative approach involving governments, intergovernmental organizations and NGOs.

All democratic countries have an obligation to improve their ability to respond when democratic and peace-oriented initiatives require urgent support. Our joint ability to provide flexible, speedy and effective assistance to those holding humanity's first line of defence will also determine our ability to safeguard our own collective security.

Faced with these enormous challenges, will the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the United Nations and individual governments have to fight a losing battle for sufficient resources before they can take action? Not necessarily: experience shows that funds are increasingly available for programmes aimed at building peace and preventing violence.

The challenge of internal strife

It is important to bear in mind that internal strife and so-called "intra-State conflicts" pose a set of challenges which are significantly different from those associated with "traditional" conflicts between States. Widespread violence in contemporary societies may be of a purely criminal nature, but is nonetheless rooted in poverty, deepening social inequalities and ineffective law enforcement. Violence may also be caused by political, ideological or even cultural factors. Or it may, as in Colombia today, stem from a combination of all three.

Such conflicts have a number of distinctive features:

- they frequently take place in situations of anarchy where there is little or no source of authority;

- they often involve a number of parties with varying degrees of strength and control over territory;
- the chain of command within such groups is often unclear;
- complex cultural, economic, and social causes make such conflicts seem intractable;
- international human rights law and humanitarian law are often ignored to an even greater extent than in international armed conflicts;
- the civilian population is often directly targeted, the distinction between combatants and non-combatants is often non-existent, and the resulting human suffering is boundless;
- intra-State conflicts are frequently linked to alleged “ethnic” divisions or other markers of identity defined by “conflict entrepreneurs” who derive personal or group gain from fomenting strife.

Let there thus be no doubt: internal conflict or strife is not only the most frequent form of violence today but also the most complex, difficult and dangerous environment to operate in. To try to approach and resolve such internal conflicts with a mindset focused on international conflicts is futile. A classic trap would be to accept the definition of a conflict laid down by many “conflict entrepreneurs” themselves. If we treat them as we would treat parties in international armed conflicts, we might end up endorsing their attempts to achieve legitimacy by recognizing and encouraging extremists.

Small-arms transfers

The unrestrained proliferation of hundreds of millions of small arms is one of the major causes of violent death and large-scale human rights abuse. The flood of post-Cold-War light weapons transforms minor incidents into massacres and makes small-scale group tensions escalate into wars. An estimated 90 per cent of casualties in contemporary conflicts – mostly children, women and other civilians – are caused by arms that can be carried by an individual. Studies by the ICRC and other agencies demonstrate how demobilization and reconciliation efforts are frustrated by the fact that these inexpensive and sturdy weapons fall into the wrong hands at the wrong time. In the absence of a concerted effort to control and limit the production and transfer of small arms there will be little progress in settling existing wars and complex emergencies and avoiding future ones.

The Norwegian Red Cross and Norwegian Church Aid, representing two large non-governmental movements, have joined forces with the Oslo International Peace Research Institute and the Norwegian Institute on International Affairs in launching an international effort to study, control and limit global small arms transfers. The project has received financial assistance from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The ultimate aim of this project is to form the widest possible coalition of like-minded governments and NGOs in a drive to control and limit the transfer of small arms to areas and communities where they are likely to incite conflict, violence and human rights abuses. A meeting of international experts was organized jointly by the ICRC and the Norwegian Red Cross in May 1998. Given the vast scale of the problem, the goals will be progressively specified as the campaign and the coalition build up. It is important to realize that this process will be very different from the successful effort to promote a treaty imposing a total ban on anti-personnel landmines, which was negotiated in Oslo during September 1997 and adopted by more than a hundred governments in Ottawa in December 1997.

So far the greatest breakthrough in the effort to limit small arms proliferation was the moratorium on production, import and export for the next three-year period signed on 30 September 1998 in Abuja, Nigeria, by the Heads of State of the 15 member countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The Norwegian initiative on small arms helped in many ways to secure governmental and non-governmental support for the moratorium in West Africa and among arms-exporting countries.

Criteria for third-party intervention

Increased awareness about the way intra-State conflict differs from traditional wars has prompted a rethinking of traditional "State-centric" approaches to internal conflicts and, in particular, reconsideration of the role of governments seeking to intervene in such conflicts. What are the opportunities for governments or NGOs to play an informal "third-party" role in a conflict situation – either as facilitators or as mediators? In what way, for example, can a small country like Norway contribute to conflict resolution and peace-making in internal conflicts?

On the basis of experience gained with peace-facilitation in the Middle East, Central America, the Balkans and elsewhere, the author sees

five fundamental preconditions for effective intervention by third parties:

- The intervening country must be perceived by all sides as having no national interest in the conflict apart from its interest in an impartial settlement and in the promotion of human rights. The third party must gain the trust and confidence of the parties to the conflict.
- There must be a national political consensus within the third country allowing for its long-term use of the necessary political, diplomatic and economic tools to facilitate the peace process in question.
- The third country must have the necessary experience, expertise and ability to maintain the momentum of its involvement.
- Substantial foreign economic assistance must be available with sufficient discretionary funds to finance, if necessary, the negotiations and reconciliation programmes (“venture capital for peace”).
- The third party must be capable of drawing upon and making use of the flexible networks of NGOs.

The role of NGOs

The advantages of involving NGOs are many. First of all, these organizations have local expertise and links with local actors. They are often able to gain access to areas of conflict where official representatives should not or cannot go. The warring factions generally regard NGOs as impartial humanitarian do-gooders, and this makes them effective as operating partners in peace initiatives.

In Norway, non-governmental groups often prove to have the best access to people in need and networks that can be mobilized quickly. Many of the larger NGOs have long experience of working with government agencies and are knowledgeable about government requirements, specifications and budget procedures, but maintain their ability to operate in a very flexible manner. Decisions can be decentralized, and operations can be jump-started. NGOs are often able to track down key personnel of whose existence the government may not even be aware. Considerable resources can be deployed, often within hours.

Altogether NGOs frequently display impressive creativity in solving practical problems, and play an important role in paving the way for the implementation of conflict-resolution measures.

However, as we all know, there are all too many examples showing that real-life operations do not always run as smoothly as this. Perhaps the greatest obstacle lies in the inherent lack of coordination between the

various agencies and organizations involved in such undertakings. Part of the problem is that NGOs and governments traditionally have different cultural and institutional mindsets, and sometimes different objectives. Governments inevitably tend to focus on “large” and longer-term macro issues, while NGOs tend to gravitate to more socially based, shorter-term micro issues. Furthermore, governments may see their main function in a conflict as contributing to an overall agreement between warring parties – to bring peace to a region even if this sometimes involves rather doubtful compromises, for example granting amnesties to those responsible for human rights abuses. NGOs, on the other hand, tend to look at the weak spots and the consequences of peace agreements – how equitable they are, how they impact on minorities, whether human rights are protected – and, importantly and controversially, they campaign to have those responsible for human rights abuses tried and punished for their crimes.

In contemporary conflict situations media interest has often led to a high level of international awareness of a given conflict, which has subsequently prompted a series of parallel and often completely uncoordinated initiatives for dealing with it. It is not at all unusual for hundreds of international NGOs to be present in a conflict zone. Many of these agencies are very small. Their level of competence, such as knowledge of the region in which they are working, varies.

The situation is, however, not ideal on the intergovernmental side either. UN agencies can also prove to be fairly uncoordinated. There are numerous examples of situations where the military and the humanitarian agencies occupy isolated worlds although they are working in the same area.

All in all, the result of such lack of coordination is at best that scarce resources are not used to optimum effect. At worst, the variety of international activities can lead to situations where a number of different, well-meaning agencies and organizations nullify each other’s work.

Improving NGO-government cooperation

There are a number of ways in which the capabilities of NGOs and governments can be more effectively harnessed:

- institutional mechanisms for cooperation or consultation, both in the field and at headquarters, can be made more effective;
- policy and strategies in key areas can be more closely coordinated, or at least a dialogue can be established;

- both NGOs and governments need to acknowledge the importance of the others' role in conflict resolution and peace-building; and
- NGOs and governments need to work together to play a more active part in cases of intra-State conflict, for example by taking preventive measures, improving humanitarian coordination, and contributing to greater international preparedness.

Achieving this coordination and cooperation will require an attitude of give-and-take on the part of both governments and NGOs. There will be times when it is difficult to reach a common position, and times when NGOs and governments will have to agree to disagree.

In Norway, a model of cooperation with NGOs has been developed that has proved effective in many of these problem areas.

Norwegian cooperation with NGOs in crisis situations

In 1991, in the wake of the Kurdish refugee crisis, the Norwegian Emergency Preparedness System (NOREPS) and the Norwegian Resource Bank for Democracy and Human Rights (NORDEM) were established. These are flexible standby mechanisms for humanitarian, human rights and conflict-related work, for the benefit of UN agencies and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The system draws upon voluntary organizations, government institutions and academic circles, and is coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

There are more than 20 Norwegian NGOs receiving government support for humanitarian assistance, conflict prevention and human rights activities in nearly a hundred countries. Over the years, tens of thousands of Norwegians have acquired field experience from working with these organizations or with the government development cooperation agency NORAD. Furthermore, it is estimated that the number of Norwegians who have taken part in UN peace-keeping operations is now equivalent to more than one per cent of the population (some 55,000). Several hundred of these experts have agreements with their respective employers and can be rapidly deployed for conflict-prevention operations.

Through NOREPS and NORDEM more than 1,500 relief workers, human rights advisers, peace mediators and observers have been dispatched to more than 30 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe and the Middle East, at the request of UN agencies, new democracies or parties to armed conflict. The personnel in question include full-time facilita-

tors of inter-community contacts across the old front lines in Cyprus and the Middle East, staff for the “truth commissions” in South Africa and Guatemala, police detectives for the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, mine-clearance specialists for Angola and northern Iraq, human rights advisers for Ethiopia and Eritrea, and human rights observers for Hebron in the West Bank.

In addition to its contributions through NOREPS and NORDEM, Norway has attempted to contribute, behind the scenes and on the parties’ own terms, to several peace processes. The best-known example is perhaps the facilitation of the Middle East peace process and the negotiation of the Oslo agreements. Norway has also taken an active part in initiatives to settle conflicts in Guatemala, the former Yugoslavia, South Africa, Sudan, the Caucasus and Sri Lanka.

Long-term efforts to settle conflicts

The ICRC, more than any other international humanitarian institution, has received the following message from its work on the battlefield: When internal tension has escalated into actual fighting, it will be a long-term and uphill effort to restore real peace, whatever the quality of the mediation effort and the strength of international pressure. Fresh misconceptions and causes of hatred easily come to compound existing ones, and people are slow to forget.

Let us remember, however, that conflict resolution does not imply that people should stop disagreeing. Conflict in the form of disagreement is the normal state of affairs in societies all over the world. What we should try to stop – or, even better, not allow to start – is violent conflict. The aim of good conflict management should be to transform attempts to settle disputes through violence into peaceful procedures for seeking a compromise. Democratic elections and the (re)introduction of popular participation in politics is one way to achieve this end.

Lasting peace requires sound and equitable economic development, in particular in the domains of housing, public health care, employment, etc. It also requires social development. After a civil war, enemies have to live together again. To make this a viable proposition, the social patterns of conflict must be transformed into patterns of coexistence. This again must take place not only at a high political level, but among ordinary people in every village and town.

NGOs can make important contributions, as they can act as facilitators between communities that have become polarized by conflict. At the grass-roots level, voluntary groups have been able to encourage old enemies to work on joint projects, fostering dialogue and thus helping to resolve disputes at the local level.

The case for preventive action

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, we are living in a time of global transition marked by contradictory tendencies. Authoritarian regimes are giving way to more democratic forces and international cooperation is increasing, but at the same time these positive trends are being countered by aggressive nationalism and brutal ethnic, social and religious strife. The ecological challenges are daunting, and in the present situation of persistent and extreme global inequality one-fifth of the world's population remains in abject poverty. In this era of the information revolution, the wealthy part of the world can no longer close its eyes to these realities. We are thus faced with new opportunities as well as new threats.

The current world security system was designed in the aftermath of the Second World War. Largely based on nuclear deterrence and aimed at avoiding a nuclear showdown between the superpowers, it served those purposes well. But it did not prevent the eruption of numerous local and regional conflicts. A major war was avoided, but not smaller wars.

Future efforts to guarantee peace and security should increasingly centre on solving problems before they escalate into crisis or conflict. In view of the many demands being made on scarce resources, focused preventive action is the most efficient way to meet tomorrow's challenges to collective security. Preventive measures require early action if they are to be effective. International assistance can preserve peace, save lives and protect human rights and democracy – if it reaches vulnerable communities in time. Too often we have stood by as passive observers while unique opportunities were lost because the necessary resources were not mobilized in time. One particularly appalling example is the endless brutality against civilians in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa. Too often, response mechanisms have proved to be inadequate to meet the early needs of embattled democracies or of troubled and disaster-prone communities.

There is, fortunately, a growing awareness among peace mediators and facilitators, as well as among governments in the North and the

South, that humanitarian operations undertaken by the ICRC, international governmental organizations and NGOs are one of the most important preventive forces in existence. Effective and impartial humanitarian action builds bridges in war-torn societies, decreases tension and helps avoid long-term bitterness.

At the same time, both the ICRC and the parties to numerous conflicts have come to realize that the International Committee can facilitate peace talks and promote the work of the mediators. In many conflict areas the ICRC has gained the confidence of the parties because of its impartial delivery of humanitarian services, and has thus become the obvious choice for providing logistic support for the peace process.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, what lessons can be learned from experience in attempting to facilitate the restoration of peace in intra-State conflicts on different continents and under different circumstances?

First, there can be no real peace unless the parties themselves – both the leaders and the population at large – are willing to make the necessary effort to reach a settlement. Lasting peace cannot be imposed from abroad. This kind of commitment to peace by the parties themselves seems finally to have emerged in Guatemala. The reason why there is still no real peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sudan or Sri Lanka is that in each of these contexts at least one of the parties is not yet interested in pursuing peace on terms that appear legitimate to the outsider.

Secondly, even when warring parties are willing to make peace, an inadequate mediation mechanism and the absence of discreet channels for contacts may thwart the most noble ambitions. In the Middle East, as in Guatemala, agreements could be concluded only after years of continual, low-key contacts and through the availability of tailor-made facilities.

Thirdly, international diplomacy is surprisingly unprepared in terms of providing the personnel, expertise and material support necessary for the effective facilitation of a peace process. The strength of the Norwegian model of cooperation between governmental agencies, NGOs and academic institutions lies in the fact that it has increased our ability to make the appropriate tools for a mediation process available immediately. Such tools may range from experts on the separation of military forces and constitutional lawyers to emergency relief personnel and financial assistance.

There is, in short, scope for creative alliances between governments, the United Nations, the ICRC and NGOs. Countries like Norway are willing to play an active and constructive role in conflict resolution in partnership with the United Nations and its members. Our experience shows that cooperation between governments and NGOs offers major advantages. Although both can operate effectively on their own in intra-State peace-making efforts, there are many circumstances in which cooperation between the two is mutually beneficial.

Perhaps only one in a hundred efforts to achieve peace will be successful. Still, it will be worth the effort. As the students of Paris said in 1968: "Be realistic, demand the impossible".

Résumé

Rétablissement de la paix et prévention de la violence : le rôle des gouvernements et des organisations non gouvernementales

par JAN EGELAND

L'auteur rappelle d'abord que la période de l'après-guerre froide est certes caractérisée par l'absence de guerres à l'échelle internationale. En revanche, l'insécurité n'a jamais été aussi grande dans certaines régions du monde que de nos jours. Pour preuve, il évoque la recrudescence des conflits internes, ainsi que la prolifération et la disponibilité des armes de petit calibre. Se référant aux expériences vécues dans différentes situations de conflit, l'auteur souligne le rôle que peuvent jouer les ONG non seulement dans la recherche d'une solution négociée mais encore, et surtout, dans la prévention du recours à la violence. Les activités du CICR et de certaines Sociétés nationales de la Croix-Rouge sont tout particulièrement mises en évidence.

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