

On the Brink: Prevention of Violent Conflict and Protection of Children in Deeply Divided Societies

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Elisabeth E. Scheper

1. Introduction

This paper is an attempt to share and reflect on my experience, having worked in the field of conflict prevention and poverty alleviation over the past two decades in Asia. The sad reality that brings us together this week is that children are increasingly becoming targets of deliberate aggression and hostility around the world. Not being able to protect children in the face of armed conflict is one of the greatest failures of the adult world today, not only because it creates so much pain, suffering and lasting damage, but most of all because the shattering of innocent lives could have well been avoided.

While working for and with the poorest of the poor in Asia for the past 20 years, I came to realise that we need to explore new ways to prevent violent conflict because:

- Most serious threats to the life and security of poor people come from within their society by the hand of their own countrymen, usually not from an unpredictable, foreign “enemy“;
- Armed communal violence is on the rise and jeopardises the fruits of many years of hard work in marginalized communities;
- Ethnicity and religion are mobilising factors for outbursts of violence but not the causes;
- Protection mechanisms of the state, judiciary, police, army, communal and religious institutions, in place to protect civilians in times of crisis, usually fail to do so at crucial moments in time;
- Violent conflicts do deep and lasting damage to local communities and it takes generations to overcome the anger, hatred and distrust and make the communities whole again;
- Victimisation of non-combatant civilians, women and children, as a deliberate strategy of armed groups is underestimated and should become a major global concern.

This paper opens with some academic data on civil wars around the world and introduces the grave concern over the changing nature of armed conflict resulting in increased, deliberate targeting of civilians. Next, the connection between absolute poverty, injustice and violent conflict is explored and the urgent need to focus on global human security explained. Long term impact of armed conflict, political violence and impunity on children and their development is assessed in two separate paragraphs. The second part of this paper presents current conflict prevention efforts, usually undertaken in post conflict situations and some major gaps that reduce its effectiveness. It examines how women and children are being involved in this work and how they can be better equipped as peace makers. Concrete recommendations to different sets of actors conclude this paper.

2. Children, Poverty and Conflict

Conflicts around the world threaten the well-being of millions of children every year. Children suffer serious or life-threatening physical injuries; they suffer from psychological effects of wartime atrocities and they suffer most when a part of their immediate family is taken away through sudden death, imprisonment or lifelong persecution. Furthermore, there are children who suffer even worst fates, being imprisoned without trial and tortured or abducted and forcibly recruited into armed forces or armed groups to serve as combatants, porters, servants or sexual slaves. All these realities of armed conflict have disastrous impact on the physical, mental and spiritual development of children, who are the future of every nation.

Today, in as many as 50 countries around the world, children are suffering in the midst of armed conflict and its aftermath. In the decade from 1986 to 1996, armed conflicts killed two million children, injured or disabled more than 6 million and left more than 1 million orphaned. At present there are over 22 million children who have been displaced by war within and outside their countries. The number of child combatants under the age of 18 is estimated at 300,000. Each month, some 800 children are killed or maimed by landmines. Yet these harrowing statistics cannot begin to describe the damage done to individual children who have endured the horror of war.¹

The work on prevention of armed conflict, political violence and the protection of children has both depressing and empowering sides. It is depressing, because conflicts are getting increasingly brutal, victimising almost exclusively non-combatant civilians, women and children. In the nineties, 90 percent of the casualties of war were civilians, against 15 percent at the start of the 20th century. At the same time however there is cause for optimism. While most armed conflicts seem to have ethnic and/or religious origins, a closer look often reveals that poverty and deprivation are usually the root causes of the violence and should these be successfully addressed, violent outbursts of conflict can be largely prevented. Never before was the global society better equipped monetarily, technologically, as well as politically, to end poverty and prevent conflict. The UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has been strongly advocating for a change in manner in which the international community deals with conflicts ever since his appointment in 1996. His aim is to transform the “culture of reaction” into a “culture of prevention”. To this end the UN Security Council adopted an important resolution last November 2001, which gives conflict prevention a top priority in programmes of most UN agencies.

Furthermore, international awareness and recognition of the importance of children has grown over the past two decades. In 1992 the UN Convention on the Right of the Child was adopted, that has meanwhile been signed by most nations around the world, resulting in official commitments to provide more protection and better programmes for children. Also, the situation of children is now more closely monitored. Since his appointment by the UN Secretary-General in September 1997 as Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Mr. Olara Otunnu has sought to ensure that key actors at international, regional and national levels address the protection and rights of war-affected children. He has been promoting the application of international norms and traditional value systems that provide for the protection of children in times of conflict. His role as public advocate and moral voice on behalf of the millions of children affected by conflict has centered on building greater awareness and mobilizing action by UN agencies, governments and NGOs.

¹ From UN Special Rapporteur, Protection of children affected by armed conflict, third report, Oct 2000.

3. State of conflicts and key factors defining civil conflicts

When analysing best ways to prevent conflict, it is important to gain first a little understanding of the magnitude and causes of civil wars. Academic research undertaken at the Kennedy School for Government of the Harvard University, identified 102 wars over the decade 1985 – 1995, of which only twelve were cross border wars and ninety (or 87 percent) were intrastate conflicts.²

Deadly civil conflicts are unevenly spread around the world. Europe had an unusual high incidence in the nineties, because of the Balkan wars. Africa has its fair share of civil conflicts, as everyone expects, but it is little known that Asia has in fact been the most intensely affected area over the past decades.

Continent	1984 - 1995	1995 – 1996
Latin America	14%	14%
Europe	13%	08%
Africa	31%	45%
Asia	42%	32%

The causes of the 102 wars can be divided into two categories:

- Territorial conflicts, e.g. stemming from contested postcolonial divisions; and
- Inter-group fights, in which the population organised around race, religion resort to armed combat to realise homeland aspirations, end economic deprivation and/or settle a religious strive.

Seventy-two of these deadly civil conflicts had an ethnic character.

By 1996 68 percent of these wars had ended.³ When the negotiated settlement and the recurrence rates of civil wars are being considered, the figures become even more dramatic. Only 25 percent ended through negotiated settlement, while military victory provided a solution in 75 percent of the cases. Furthermore, military victory seems to provide a more lasting solution too, because only 15 percent of the conflicts resumed within five years after a military victory, while for negotiated settlements, the figures show a staggering 50 percent of the wars had resumed. One third of the 102 wars were still ongoing at the end of the decade or in stalemate.

III Privatisation of conflict: lack of hope for a better future

There is another alarming trend, which should alert us to monitoring and preventing civil conflicts. Though most civil conflicts have an ethnic dimension, ethnicity alone never provides a sufficient explanation. While conflicts in Rwanda and Yugoslavia occurred along ethnic lines, other examples of extremely violent civil conflicts, e.g. Cambodia and Guatemala, clearly did not.

² The academic definition for a war or civil conflict is not shared by everyone, because it excludes small conflicts and most conflict among indigenous communities, because their numbers are too small. Three important elements of the definition are: 1. There should be at least 1.000 battle deaths a year; 2. The two parties should be organised and purposefully equipped to engage in warfare, 3. The constituency of an ethnic group should be at least 50.000 persons.

³ Dr. Monica D. Toft, from Fall 2000 Course on Civil Wars, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

Tharoor⁴ concludes that

“[C]ivil conflict is usually the result of failing political leadership. There are always more prosaic motives of ethnic leaders to be considered... Indeed it would be safer to proceed from the assumption that politics is at the root of most contemporary conflicts”. Ethnic conflict can be used by “..opportunistic political leaders who find in it the ideal vehicle to preserve or enhance power, or to distract their citizens from other domestic failures, often when ethnic division is nowhere as profound as it is being claimed”.⁵

Tharoor also identifies a number of “circumstantial factors” that are often overlooked. The mere proliferation of weapons can also cause conflict (e.g. Afghanistan). Furthermore, the role of external incitement, and especially the impact of an ethnic Diaspora, in intellectually and financially underpinning deadly civil conflict and in nurturing political extremism is not to be underestimated (e.g. Sri Lanka and Cuba).⁶

The economics of ethnic conflict in poor societies should also be considered. Conflicts are often kept alive by the opportunities for profit and the issue of who actually benefits becomes key in understanding what motivates the battling fractions. Armed conflict can be extremely lucrative for the warring elites, who would effectively lose their access to natural resources and income once the conflict ends. Precious natural resources play rather decisive roles in a number of recent deadly conflicts: diamonds in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Angola; drugs in Colombia, Afghanistan and Myanmar; oil in the Democratic republic of Congo. In addition, the steady influx of relief goods provided by international humanitarian agencies form an important source of food and medical supplies, which would dry up once the deadly conflict ends. This privatisation has changed the face of armed conflicts dramatically over the past two decades. Modern armed civil conflict results in disproportional high rates of casualties and displacement. As they are commonly fought with conventional weapons and rely on strategies of ethnic expulsion and annihilation, many more civilians are killed than soldiers. War and civil conflict in the 1990s forced 50 million people to flee their homes and become internally displaced persons for prolonged periods– i.e. 1 person of every 120 in the world. The politics of civil conflict, the years of depressing poverty and the lack of hope for a better future, makes the continuation of armed conflict an almost rational choice, an alternative way of life. Being “deprived of hope” to a fair chance in life provides the most immediate cause for violence and conflict.

Three trends have acquired greater importance in the 1990s. The role of television is becoming more important as a propaganda instrument to whip up passions and hatred; secondly there is a growing involvement of “private armies” and “military companies” providing expert military services to their combatant clients around the world; which results in the reduction of successful negotiated solutions to civil wars in the nineties. In the twentieth century, the average duration of a war between nations was twenty months, as opposed to 120 months for civil wars.

⁴ Mr. Shashi Tharoor is Director of Special Programmes and the UN Secretary General’s Office.

⁵ Tharoor gives four major causes that can trigger future conflict:

- 1) residual problems from the end of the era of colonisation (border disputes, conflicts between groups which were materially favoured and the disadvantaged, or overcoming mixed colonial histories);
- 2) state fragmentation and re-formation, as result of the geopolitical changes in the nineties;
- 3) failed states (enduring state of underdevelopment combined with crisis in governance); and
- 4) States in economic transformation towards open market capitalism.

(Tharoor, Shashi - The Future of Civil Conflict. 1999. World Policy Journal, Volume XVI, no.1, Spring 1999, p.01-11.)

⁶ With the growing ‘displacement’ “the movement of populations across frontiers everywhere means the expatriation is a central feature of the Zeitgeist. .. Perhaps 5% of the earth’s people today live in countries other than those in which they were born.” In other words: the ethnic diaspora impact will only increase.

4. Conflict, Absolute Poverty and Human Security

It is widely acknowledged that conflict and development or the lack thereof are closely interlinked⁷. Most violent conflicts stem from deeply rooted social and economic injustices often related to identity politics and extended periods of targeted deprivation. Long-term development programmes, accompanied by structural political and social change, are needed to eradicate the real causes of poverty and thereby conflict. The UNDP identifies three global trends that currently aggravate extreme poverty: a) the social fragmentation – the widening disparities in income, job and income insecurity and financial volatility; b) the global “uncivil” society – organized crime, HIV/Aids, environmental degradation; and c) the privatisation of civil conflict.⁸

Violent conflict cannot be prevented, if absolute poverty and injustice issues are not addressed globally. This requires a holistic approach. The Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have been advocating for poverty eradication through equal opportunity and social justice for decades. The international community made concrete commitments to achieve poverty reduction by 2015 at the UN Social Summit in 1995 and the World Food Summit in 1996. But the financial commitments have lagged behind and it is unlikely that the poverty reduction targets will be met. There has even been a negative trend in the Official Development Assistance (ODA) to the poor countries of the past decade, when the already limited generosity of the rich world has been shirking further.⁹

Likewise, the international community needs to review the global concept of security. Security was traditionally defined as state-oriented and military in nature in defence against ‘external’ threats. National security therefore equated with strengthening of military capacity. Yet for most people in the world, the greatest threats to security come from internal adversaries, resulting in disease, hunger, environmental contamination, or even domestic violence. Since the early nineties a new concept of human security has been developed and advocated. The prime human security objective is to provide to all citizens’ basic food, economic, health, environmental, cultural and political security. As such it advocates new moral obligations, especially for local authorities and military, and changing policies of equity and distribution of resources, which may run contrary to mainstream political economics at both the national and international levels.

The international conflict prevention approach should change accordingly. Traditional ways of conflict prevention, e.g. early warning, preventive diplomacy and military deterrence, should make way for so-called “foundational prevention approaches”¹⁰, that are directed at resolving horizontal inequalities based on social, religious, cultural and ethnic identities, which

⁷ Absolute poverty is a state of powerlessness in which people are unable to exercise their basic human rights or control virtually any aspect of their lives. Poverty is almost always caused by human action or inaction. It can be made worse by natural calamities, and human violence, oppression and environmental destruction. But it is maintained by entrenched inequalities and by institutional and economic mechanisms

⁸ UNDP - Human Rights and Human Development, Human Development Report 2000. 2000. New York, Oxford Press

⁹ The ODA to the Least Developed Countries declined from 24% to 21% of the total aid between 1988 and 1998, while the total ODA net expenditure declined from US\$ 53 billion in 1992 to US\$ 41 billion in 1998. It is clear that the rich world has to put the money where their mouth is or else the commendable efforts of the UN will not be achieved.

¹⁰ Ginkel, Hans van, and Newman, Edward - In Quest of Human Security. 2000. Tokyo, in: Japan Review of International Affairs, Spring 2000, p.59-82.

are often breeding grounds for violent conflict.

5. The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children

Children are often deliberately targeted in armed conflicts. To destroy or harm what is of the highest value to the enemy, indeed the very symbol of a community's future is one of 'the most effective forms of terrorism'. Children are affected by violence in the four major ways¹¹:

A. Physical and psychological effects

The most visible effects of armed conflict on children are physically inflicted ones. Civilian children are killed outright as a result of torture, firearms, bombs and landmines. Or they sustain serious injuries and or life long disabilities - losing limbs, eyesight and hearing. Alongside the physiological impacts is the psychological traumas children experience as a result of war. Children witness parents, relatives, and friends being killed and their community life being destroyed. Subsequently, they may appear withdrawn, exhibit signs of depression or hyper alertness, and have vivid nightmares. Regression in childhood development such as bed wetting and refusing to speak is also common. Some children develop behavioural disorders and become acutely fearful, extremely restless or aggressive. Others feel confused and/or hopeless and lethargic.

One of the most insidious physical and psychological harms to be inflicted on children in intrastate conflict is soldiers or rebel troops systematically raping girls. Rape was used as a weapon of war in Rwanda, undermining community ties as rape victims become completely ostracized. Rape was used as an instrument of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. In military camps girls were compelled to provide sexual favours to soldiers in return for food and to ensure physical protection. As a result of these sexual practices, the transmission of STD's including the HIV virus became more widespread. Rape, unwanted pregnancies and STD's have manifold destabilising effects on individuals, their families and society at large too.

B. Food insecurity and disruption of health services

Endemic civil conflict is often dubbed 'low intensity' because 'less people die from bombs or bullets than they do from lack of food and medical services': up to twenty times more citizens, including children die in this manner.¹² Food insecurity affects children in particular. In prolonged conflict situations the whole food chain is disrupted. This starts with production; crops and stock are destroyed - food and future income revenues are drastically reduced lessening security. The next food distribution chain is affected. The state transport networks are often crippled when bridges and roads are being blown up. In turn this affects food availability. Food supplies become scarcer and prices inevitably rise beyond people's reach.

¹¹ Examples quoted here come from two studies:

1. Graça Machel - The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, International Conference on War-Affected Children, Winnipeg, Canada, September 2000; and
2. Sara Edson, Children's Security and Human Insecurity: Mitigating the Impacts of Armed Conflict on Civilian Children - the Rhetoric and Reality of Human Security in the Post Cold War Era., University of Leeds publication (originally a MA thesis), 1999.

¹² Edson, 1999, p. 23

As a result children are likely to eat less and to eat food of lesser quality. In many poor societies the malnutrition in girls is traditionally higher because of their low status; this vulnerability worsens in prolonged conflict situations. Children in refugee camps on the other hand, are more prone to infectious diseases like diarrhoea and may subsequently not absorb nutrients effectively. This nutritional side of the health equation is exacerbated by the lack of health supplies and disruption of the immunisation programmes.

C. Disruption to education

Just like the disruption of health care, schools are similarly targeted, directly or indirectly by armed conflict. With the pre-eminent focus of the warring fractions on defence expenditure, resources are diverted away from education. This was the case in Mozambique where up to 45% of the primary school infrastructure was destroyed as the conflict progressed. In the Rwandan crisis in 1994 more than two thirds of the teachers fled or were killed. In Turkey and Kosovo, ethnic Kurds and Albanians have been targeted by the state and forbidden instruction in their native tongues. Given a political and social atmosphere of fear, disruption and violence - and frustrated by limited resources it is hardly surprising that children, such as those documented in recent studies in Palestine, find it difficult to concentrate on their studies.

The educational setbacks have far reaching repercussions. In the long term, children's educational development is impaired, which has a direct impact on the future of the country's economy, since children are the human resource base of the next generation. Years of schooling and vocational skill training thus lost, will result in or perpetuate existing underdevelopment and will hinder the fractured society's recovery process even further.

D. Further social and cultural ramifications

In violent conflicts children often become separated from their parents. In the Rwandan genocide of 1994 an estimated 90,000 to 115,000 children became orphaned or unaccompanied minors. Losing or separating from parents, or witnessing parents being deliberately harmed, intensifies children's vulnerability and feeling of insecurity. Numerous studies show that the presence of family members helps mitigate negative impacts of war by providing at least a base for human security.

From these fundamental disturbances to the family unit we can already understand how a society can become traumatized. Cultural disorientation however can have major ramifications too. In schools linguistic and religious negation of ethnic minority culture has often been ongoing for years. But during armed conflict parties engage in outright destruction of traditional economic lifestyles or of places of importance to religious and cultural life of their opponents, such as churches or mosques. As a result, children can become entirely disjointed from their traditional culture. A study of teenagers in Juba (Sudan) for instance, attested to a significant loss of social identity amongst adolescents, when the traditional pastoralist life style centred on the cycle of animal husbandry broke down as result of the ongoing Sudanese civil war.

Research among child warriors in Sierra Leone and Burundi revealed that many kids never lived a family-based stable community life since they grew up in refugee camps. Being moved around constantly, with fathers absent and fear as a basic condition of life, their moral and social development has become deeply affected. Without a clear sense of knowing good from evil and of belonging, militia gangs give children an outlet, a protection from fear through the exertion of control over and the harming of others at will. During his field research Summers frequently witnessed young militia leaders using Rambo movies to further this image and

atmosphere and provide child warriors with an alternative role model for survival.¹³

6. The Impact of Political Violence and Impunity on Children

Political violence has the potential of affecting many more children than other forms of violence. It is different from e.g. domestic violence because it concerns inter-group violence (violence determined by groups affiliation) and the perpetrator is a stranger to the victim. Political violence is considered to be more stressful for children than other forms of violence, because of the concealed, unresolved and cumulative nature. Furthermore, its prolonged state and unpredictability makes it potentially more psychological damaging¹⁴. The mechanisms of coping and resilience of children have long been of interest to researchers and policymakers alike. The fact that children seem to be able to recover from enormous suffering, has led experts conclude that children are more resilient and more capable of recovering after terrible situations than adults. But political violence and impunity have much more far reaching effects on the society as a whole and might therefore impact indirectly in more subtle ways on everyday lives of children.

The malleability of children's physical and psychological growth and development makes them more apt to changes and adaptations to violent situations. But constant fear, living without any possibility of planning ahead, means that children's body, mind and thinking will adapt and restructure accordingly. Research of Safe the Children Fund concluded that:

“The developing brain of a child that knows the presence of violence will adapt so that the impulses that will best protect his biological being will be stimulated and reinforced. Other impulses, social impulses; possibilities for learning and for creating relationships will need to be put on hold in order to create the security for the biological being. In fact we know quite a lot about children's capacity to adapt to life threatening situations. We know how the brain develops under stress and we know how the adrenaline, the cortisol and other hormones impose their own developmental deviation on children exposed to violence and threats. Children are not resilient but they are malleable, they will and they can adapt.”¹⁵

Hence, children will adapt, but their ability function in the society in future will be affected. Research into impunity in Cambodia learnt that the impact after twenty years is clearly visible, e.g. in the lack of long term vision, mutual trust, accountability, respect for the judiciary etc. Cambodia had four different regimes in the past 20 years, each starting all over again. The lack of a long term vision of political leaders makes them act in the interest of short term profits for themselves, and their supporters. Perpetrators learn that there is nothing to fear for committing crimes because prosecutions and trials rarely take place-- especially not with connections on high places. The impact on the society and the insecurity of civilians is startling¹⁶.

The World Council of Churches reached similar conclusions in its 2001 publication on Impunity¹⁷. Impunity is seen as the major reason for human right violations to persist. Perpetrators of similar violations in the past have often escaped accountability for their deeds. In response to those who claim that the past should be left behind once a conflict is over, the victims of violence are insisting that there can be no justice and no healing of a society unless the truth is

¹³ Dr. Marc Summers, Professor at Boston University, from a presentation in the Harvard Conference "Children under Fire", held February 2001

¹⁴ Ed Cairns - Children and Political Violence. Oxford press, 1996.

¹⁵ Safe the Children Foundation - Child Participation, Implementing Children's rights in situations of conflict and migration, Speech in EU seminar, March 2001

¹⁶ ADHOC, Licado and others - Impunity in Cambodia, a local human rights NGOs' report, June 1999

¹⁷ World Council of Churches – Impunity, An Ethical Perspective. 1999. WCC publication, Geneva

told; unless the perpetrators are held accountable and those responsible confess their guilt, ask for forgiveness and give concrete signs of repentance. The work of the various national Truth Commissions as well as the International Tribunals for Former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda tries to address these concerns. But other institutions could contribute to this process of ending impunity and political violence as well.

In the recommendations the WCC invites and challenges religious institutions in particular to reach across traditional boundaries and join others in the search for new paths towards genuine justice, repentance and reconciliation and thus to provide hope. The WCC's work on impunity, truth and reconciliation that started in 1993 now enters a third phase. This programme builds upon earlier work and plans to deepen the theological analysis; develop a wider network of legal specialists, sociologists and experts in conflict mediation; and explore further the inter-faith dimensions of the questions. Beyond study, it will try to stimulate action/reflection networks in the various regions, and provide means by which they can consult and strengthen one another.

Another interesting approach was adopted by a group of local NGOs in Macedonia in 1999 with the help of the International Committee of the Red Cross to develop a unique education programme for high school students from different ethnic and religious backgrounds¹⁸. The programme has three central goals: promote peaceful co-existence, moral development and conflict management, and the shared human values. The prolonged ethnic conflict has challenged the core values of the Macedonian society; values which children need to resolve the important, moral dilemmas in life. The project trains children in confronting ethical dilemmas and promotes understanding and appreciation for co-existence, which is more than passively living together without fighting with a focus on cooperation and mutual trust. Finally, it helps students to develop a "culture of dialogue" in which children with different backgrounds create a new common ground and thereby new room to communicate and respect and promote human values.

VII Conflict resolution, reconciliation and prevention

Before introducing a couple of interesting conflict prevention cases, it is necessary to spend a little time on defining conflict and the different conflict handling mechanisms, because the terms are often mixed up. Conflict can be defined as a perceived divergence of interests or a belief that current aspirations of different individuals or groups cannot be achieved simultaneously. Because diverging interests among individuals or among groups are a natural consequence of living together (interdependence), conflict is an inevitable feature of social life and often a positive force for change.

Conflict is also a cultural phenomenon, which implies that there are culturally specific ways of perceiving and responding to conflict. These responses can sometimes remain invisible as unquestioned social assumptions to the members of any given culture¹⁹. Societies deal with conflict by denying its very existence, negotiating a mutually desirable solution, compromising, threatening verbally, attacking physically, appealing to a third party, and so on. Preventing and/or resolving conflict can also be perceived in terms of strategies to protect ones own and/or the others' interest. These strategies include avoiding, yielding, contending and problem solving.²⁰

¹⁸ From a presentation by Mr. Darko Jordanov, Program Responsible for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Macedonia, at a Harvard/MIT Conflict Mediation Training, May 2001.

¹⁹ Fry, Douglas (ed) - Cultural Variation in Conflict Resolution Alternatives to Violence, 1999, p.11

²⁰ Hizkias Assefa – The making of Reconciliation (In: People building peace, European Centre for peace

Hence when dealing with conflict prevention in cross-cultural settings or in situations in which the power balance between the conflicting parties is asymmetric, it is very important to analyse the cultural assumptions first.

When third parties get involved in ending violent conflict there are four conflict handling mechanisms to choose from depending on the nature, stage and involvement in the conflict:

1. **Conflict management** approaches generally tend to focus more on mitigating or controlling the destructive consequences that emanate from a given conflict than on finding solutions to underlying issues causing it. The use of military force for deterrence or in peace keeping (separating the conflict parties from each other so that they do not keep inflicting harm) are typical conflict management strategies. Unless the need for change is internalised, the change is likely to be only temporary.
2. **Conflict resolution** approaches aim at going beyond mitigation of consequences and attempt to resolve the substantive and relational root-causes so that the conflict comes to an end. Integrative solutions are almost always the most desirable. They tend to last longer and to contribute more to the interests of both parties and the welfare of the broader community than to compromises and agreements about how to choose a winner.
3. The distinguishing aspect of **reconciliation** from other forms of conflict handling is that it is not adversarial and there is no coercion. It is in essence “a voluntary initiative of the conflicting parties to acknowledge their responsibility and guilt and its force for change is primarily internal.” There is a readiness of the conflicting parties to ‘let go’ of the anger and bitterness caused by the conflict, a commitment by the offender not to repeat the injury; a sincere effort to redress past grievances and to enter into a new mutually enriching relationship.
4. While conflict management and resolution are reactive, they come into motion once conflict has surfaced; **conflict prevention** tries to anticipate the destructive aspects of the conflict before they arise and attempts to take positive measures to prevent them from occurring.²¹ The last two sections of this paper deal with this category only.

7. Conflict prevention and the role of women and children

The majority of conflict prevention efforts are currently undertaken in post conflict societies, aimed at preventing the past deadly conflict from re-emerging. In December 2000, USAID presented the results of two years research in six such countries. The study²² analysed the impact of deadly intrastate conflict on women and the types of women NGOs that emerged during the conflict and concluded that there are five major problems that impact women, children and gender relations negatively: the violence against civilians, of which 95% is female; the internal displacement, 90 % of the refugees are women and children; the redefinition of female identities in the society, both as victims and as perpetrators; the targeted destruction of civilian property leading to increased poverty and starvation; and the communal violence leading to

Studies, Utrecht, 1999, p.37-48)

- avoiding (low concern for one’s own and other’s outcomes).
- yielding (low concern for one’s own and high concern for other’s outcomes)
- contending (high concern for one’s own and low concern for other’s outcomes),
- problem solving (high concern for both one’s own and other’s outcomes).

²¹ idem, p. 39

²² US Agency for International Development - Women and Women’s Organisations In Postconflict Societies; The Role of International Assistance. 2000. Washington DC, USAID Program and Operations Assessment Report No.28. the six case countries are Rwanda, Cambodia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Georgia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

lasting bitterness, anger and hatred.

In all six countries, the most traumatising factor for women and children in conflict situations is the lack of physical security, both during and after the conflict (e.g. demobilisation of the militia). Family structures fell apart through death and trauma and domestic violence increased. Trauma in women manifests itself in depression, chronic fatigue, stress, anguish and listlessness. During, but especially after the conflict, women are also confronted with economic restrictions leading in two countries to a decline in the status of women. Lack of property rights for women in many societies make female-headed households lose their land, nor do they have access to bank loans. Destruction of livelihood leads to sharp increase of poverty. At the same time, the war seems to have had some positive impact on the political participation. Women expanded their public roles and ran local political institutions during the war. Initially women organised themselves to support the war. Later women founded organisation to promote peaceful solutions and some women became powerful voices in peace-accords.

The responses of local organisations, especially of women's groups in dealing with conflict, rehabilitation and peace are remarkably similar around the world too.²³ The women NGOs are mostly active in trauma counselling, micro-credit, voter education, gender awareness, law reform and political advocacy. The main strategy they choose to prevent conflicts from re-emerging has been to work on fundamental changes. They advocate to pay greater attention to civilian security, e.g. through security sector reforms and greater participation of women in police forces, judiciary system and in peace committees. They stress the need for cost-effective indigenous approaches to provide long-term treatment to traumatized women and children, and ask the international community to make concerted efforts to acknowledge and prevent sexual abuse of women and girls. And finally, they are very active in promoting female candidates to run in post conflict elections and in increasing the overall women's political participation.

Another example of conflict reconciliation and prevention is provided by the Indonesian Komnas Perempuan, the independent National Commission on Violence against Women, that addresses the violence against women and children in Indonesia since 1998. Women and girls have been suffering disproportional in the ongoing political violence. The KP research shows that the impact of military attacks on civilian populations on women is far greater than the impact of cross-communal violence. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that sexual violence women and girls face in situations of armed conflict, is connected to patterns of domestic violence that women face in everyday life during peace time; and that religion and cultural norms are not supportive to engage in a national debate on these issues. In response, the KP and Indonesian women's organisations have been undertaking many initiatives. They have provided emergency assistance, set up trauma teams, documented atrocities, campaigned for peace, organised women in conflict areas, and influenced national policies to end the violations. The Komnas Perempuan has reached the same conclusion as the women organisations in the USAID study: only through fundamental changes in the society can work on prevention of violent conflict and protection of women and children is successful. Unfortunately in Indonesia too there is still only marginal participation of women in official meetings, peace negotiations and political office. The Komnas Perempuan therefore ends its Beijing plus 5 report with a strong appeal to the international community:

“The Indonesian women urge the international community to continue its pressure on Indonesia so that what ever gains and progresses are achieved in these difficult years of transition continue

²³ The researchers noted a sharp increase in number of women's NGOs as result of the increased female political participation; disillusionment with lack a gender agenda; post conflict democratisation that provided more political space for NGO work; and international donor assistance that came in.

to build up to a real social, political and economic transformation in the nation. Indonesian decision makers need to be continuously reminded and pressured that peace, democracy and justice can never be achieved without women's involvement from the very beginning."²⁴

Pro-active conflict prevention efforts have strongly expanded in scope and popularity over the past few years and are now commonly referred to as peace building. Peace building is a process seeking to transform non-violent attitudes and behaviours to achieve sustainable peace. The term "sustainable peace" refers to a situation characterised by the absence of physical violence, the elimination of political economic and cultural forms of discrimination a high level of internal and external legitimacy, self sustainability and a prosperity to enhance the constructive transformation of conflicts.²⁵ The Cambodia Peace Building Study Project identified eleven predominant areas of work that range from peace marches, education and - exhibitions to demobilisation, civil disarmament, conflict resolution, trauma counselling and anger management. While the activities in peace building have increased, the report unfortunately concludes that "... individual peace efforts routinely lack access to resources and support, lose the benefits of lessons learned and can be prone to isolation."²⁶

Reflecting on 20 years experience in non-violence, conflict transformation and reconciliation from another angle John Paul Lederach, a renowned Mennonite peace builder, concludes that conflict prevention has not been very successful as yet, but that there is hope for future improvement even though three gaps hamper current efforts:

"The hope is rooted in the fact that the second half of the 20th century, though rife with conflict, engendered the most prolific advancement of non-violent conflict transformation activities systematically known in human history setting the stage for a potential singularity of peace building in the 21st century. The gaps emerge from a reductionism focused on techniques driven by a need to find quick fixes and solutions to complex, long term problems rather than systemic understanding of peace building as a process-structure."²⁷

The first gap Lederach identifies is lack of vertical integration of peace initiatives. There is no ability to develop relationships of respect and understanding between higher levels of leadership with community and grassroots levels of leadership and vice versa. Most peace building work, particularly in the field of conflict resolution has been aimed at improving aspects of relationships through negotiation, dialogue and mediation by getting counterparts of relative equal status to meet with each other. The emphasis on this type of dialogues has fostered mainly horizontal relationships and lacks responsive and coordinated relationships up and down the levels of leadership in a society affected by protracted violent conflict. "The challenge of vertical capacity is how to develop genuine recognition that peace building involves multiple activities at different levels of leadership, taking place simultaneously, each level distinct in its needs and interdependent."²⁸

The second gap deals with the lack of structural transformation to bring the much needed social and economic justice required for sustainable peace to last. "In the past fifteen years peace processes have delivered a reduction of direct violence but have rarely attained the aspirations of desired structural change. Thus there persists a deep felt perception in many peoples' minds that

²⁴ Komnas Perempuan - Indonesian Women's Approach to the Consequences of armed Conflict: Engendering Humanitarianism, Peace and Justice. 2000. New York, paper presented to Beijing +5 Conference, June 2000

²⁵ Cambodia Peace Building Study Project - Peace Mapping, A study of peace building initiatives in Cambodia, a local NGO working group report, Phnom Penh 2001, p.1

²⁶ Idem, Preface.

²⁷ John Paul Lederach - Justpeace, the challenge of the 21st century. In: People building peace, European Center for Conflict Prevention, Utrecht, 1999, p27 – 36.

²⁸ idem, p.30

to reduce violence peace compromises social justice. (..) The justice gap emerges in part because we have not adequately developed a peace building framework that reduces direct violence and produces social and economic justice.” Hence Lederach concludes that third parties should reorient their investment (including funding, research and practice), no longer be negotiation centric, but focus on “...developing practices and frameworks for understanding how to create and sustain collaborative non-violent processes of structural change.”²⁹

The last gap identified is the limitation of seeing peace as an end product, not as a dynamic ongoing process of transformation. It is also the language that fails us. “Resolution lends itself to a metaphor that suggests our goal is to end something not desired. (..) To conceptualize peace as process-structure moves us away from a myopic focus on agreements and events and toward a commitment of embracing the permanence of relationship building.”³⁰

Conflict prevention and peace building seen in this new light, that puts a strong focus on securing the vertical integration of conflict prevention efforts, incorporates non-violent processes of structural change and understands conflict prevention as a dynamic process of transformation, brings us back full circle to the first part of this paper and might provide a successful approach to end absolute poverty and deadly conflict and hence bring human security and a life in dignity for all.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

This paper has attempted to present a holistic view on the incidence, causes and ways to prevent violent conflict in the poor nations of the world. While working for and with the poorest in Asia for the past two decades, I came to realise that new ways to prevent violent conflict must be explored. Because most serious threats to the life of poor people come from within their own society, structural economic and social changes need to be promoted to end years of deliberate deprivation and discrimination. Systematic frustration of human needs is the major cause of conflict. Therefore, peaceful solutions to violent conflicts need to be sought inside the divided societies, working closely with communities and authorities at different levels. Intensified armed conflict furthermore jeopardises the very achievements in reducing absolute poverty and injustice. For poor countries development or the lack thereof is the main peace and security issue.

Conflict prevention should thus work from a broad understanding of the continuum of conflict and responses that can be applied. The foundations of human and thereby child protection are social and economic security, resources security, inclusive and representative governments and the absence of gross inequality, especially in diverse societies. Hence, the traditional ways of conflict prevention, through early warning and prevention of violence through diplomacy and military deterrence, are now challenged. Horizontal inequalities, which are systematic and paralleled with social, religious, cultural and ethnic identities, are often a breeding ground for conflict. Being “deprived of hope” for a fair chance in life, provides the most immediate cause for violence and conflict.

My first overarching recommendation to all four actors is thus to start implementing the Right to Development³¹ worldwide at last. The Declaration on the Right to Development was

²⁹ *idem*, p.31-32

³⁰ *idem*, p.34

³¹ Article 1, paragraph 1, of the declaration on the right to development (1986) states: “the right to

adopted in the United Nations by an overwhelming majority in 1986 and has four essential principles. Firstly, development is an inalienable human right. Secondly, development refers to a particular process, in which all have an equal opportunity to participate in development and in the fair distribution of benefits there from³². The realisation of this Right also requires that women have an active role in development process and that appropriate economic and social reforms should be carried out with a view to eradicating all social injustices. Thirdly, development is a process in which “every human person and all peoples” are entitled to participate, which provides concrete opportunities to include the needs of children structurally in development efforts. Fourthly, to provide development to all is the prime responsibility of the states and that action is required on national as well as international levels.

As a consequence the UN and its member states have the duty, both individually and collectively, to formulate international development policies and to provide poorer countries with appropriate means and facilities to promote rapid poverty eradication. This approach could also give new impetus to the poverty reduction commitments made by the international community during the UN Social Summit in 1995 and the World Food Summit in 1996, as at the present rate none of the commitments will be met by the target date of 2015. Furthermore, it should reverse the negative Official Development Assistance (ODA) trend of the past decade, when the already limited generosity of the rich world has been shirking further.³³

The second main recommendation is to build local capacity in conflict prevention awareness and mediation skills. Recently several new initiatives have emerged. I am currently working with Asian NGOs, a few bilateral agencies and the UN University on preparing regional training and south-south networking programmes. The core idea is to make training on conflict analysis, actor mapping and skill training on negotiation and conflict mediation available at grassroots level, as part of ongoing poverty alleviation programmes of NGOs and bilateral aid agencies in deeply divided societies.

It is of utmost important to facilitate South South networks to build and prosper at the same time. This will enable local staff from civil society and religious groups, who have been working on conflict prevention and rehabilitation under extremely difficult circumstances, to share their experience, learn from each other’s successful approaches and to blow off steam and get re-energised. Working in conflict resolution is a most stressful and lonely job. Local professionals are totally absorbed when dealing with traumatised victims and war atrocities, so much so that many burn out, withdraw from the programmes and are often in need of trauma counselling themselves. We need to acknowledge their hardships and nurture their well-being. They are the bravest and most precious resource without which all of this work cannot be done.

The third core recommendation is to promote proportional representation of women and children as serious partners in all political, development and peace building efforts. Not only because it is their moral and legal right, but also because it will make conflict prevention work

development is an inalienable human right by virtues of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realised” (Sengupta 2000, p.1)

³² Article 8 elaborates by stating that the measures for realizing the right to development shall for all in their access to basic resources, health services, food, housing, employment and in the fair distribution of income.(Idem, p.3)

³³ The ODA to the Least Developed Countries declined from 24% to 21% of the total aid between 1988 and 1998, while the total ODA (net expenditure) declined from US\$ 53 billion in 1992 to US\$ 41 billion in 1998. (from: Oxfam International Strategic Plan, Introduction)

much more effective. Women aren't natural peace doves, just as men aren't natural warriors³⁴. But the role of women in the society, especially during conflict, makes that they have a better eye for community and household interests and the well being and protection of children is the prime responsibility of women everywhere in the world. To empower especially children to implement positive programmes for conflict prevention and reconciliation is in my view of paramount importance. This might reduce the risk of vengeance recurring in their adult lives. The Canadian Peacebuilding Co-ordinating Committee's report, "Peace is Every Child's Right"³⁵, recommends this can best be done through e.g.:

- Provide training and funding for other forms of economic livelihood for young people, to replace the economic incentive of participation in conflict.
- Effective programs to collect and destroy weapons, and reduce the demand for them;
- Youth participation in the development of practical provisions in peace agreements
- Inclusion of NGO advocates for children in the peace process;

The fourth and last recommendation is to develop alternative approaches to promote peaceful co-existence, moral development and common human values that can pave the way for genuine justice and reconciliation in divided societies. I have tried to describe how prolonged deprivation of hope and exposure to war, political violence and impunity can erode the fundamental human values to the point that it threatens the core value that unites us all: human dignity. Human dignity is the inner driving force that enables humans to strive to survive and accomplish³⁶. It is also the last value that any human wants to lose. And our own dignity is conditional upon our ability and willingness to extend the scope of human protection and security to others.

Peace is more than an end to conflict. Peace building is an ongoing process of transformation towards a state of peaceful co-existence, which is based on three assumptions: irreconcilable differences and intractable conflicts must not be permitted to escalate into total conflict; all human fate is ultimately indivisible; and that helping people see the human face of others is an indispensable prelude to human action.³⁷ There are several interesting initiatives that can be furthered and promoted. The Macedonian NGO/ICRC moral development experience is one example, but there are also interfaith initiatives that deserve more attention. Like the Mindful Mediation work of the Buddhist Research Institute a.o. in Bangkok in close collaboration with the renowned Quaker Peace builder John McConnell, who developed a Buddhist mediation approach based on the four noble truths; the response to greed, hate, anger and delusion and mediation skills and the kusala-mula³⁸. Given the importance of religion and the status of religious leaders in communal life in poor societies, there is a special opportunity and responsibility for religious institutions to contribute to this field.

³⁴ The Seville declaration stated in 1986 that there are no biological human inclinations to warfare. It is scientifically incorrect to claim that war or any other violent behaviour is genetically programmed into our human nature. The fact that warfare is frequent among humans and does not occur in animals, indicates that "war is the product of human culture: language, tools and technology made warfare possible." p.33/34

³⁵ Children and Armed Conflict Working Group, Canadian Peacebuilding Co-ordinating Committee - Peace is Every Child's Right: A Plan of Action prepared for the First International Conference on War-affected Children, September, 2000

³⁶ Ginkel, H van - In Quest of "Human Security", in Japan Review of International Affairs, vol 14, no.1 Spring 2000, p.79.

³⁷ Weiner, E. - Coexistence work: a new profession, in The Handbook of Interethnic Co-existence, p.13

³⁸ McConnell, J.A. - Mindful Mediation, a handbook for Buddhist peacemakers. Asia Books, Bangkok 1995.

Concrete recommendations to UN agencies and governments:

1. Recommit to the development target set in the UN Social Summit in 1995 and the World Food Summit in 1996, to end absolute poverty and provide basic health and education services to all children by 2015.
2. Promote good governance and experiment with the “development compact” concept as a concrete initiative to implement the Right to Development commitments.
3. Step up and improve programmes working with local authorities, police and army on the subject of civilian protection and human security in general and conflict prevention and protection of children in particular.
4. Support multi actor conflict prevention capacity building initiatives both financially and technically, in which the civil society organisations have equal ownership and responsibilities, given the fact that most states are a party in intrastate conflicts.
5. Support the work of the Special Rapporteur on the Protection of Children in Armed Conflict and others in their quest to have children represented at the table in planning conflict prevention, peace building and reconciliation agreements and programmes.

Concrete recommendations to Interfaith NGOs and WCRP:

1. Step up advocacy activities to constituencies and UN and the international community to give absolute poverty eradication central priority in the next decade.
2. Provide technical assistance and platform opportunities to civil society organisations, especially women and youth organisations, to facilitate information exchange and South - South networking, linking and learning in the field of community based conflict prevention.
3. Support the work of women’s organisations in post conflict societies who seek to develop alternative culturally appropriate or indigenous, low cost but long term trauma counselling programmes for women and children.
4. Start and support new initiatives and experiments to develop innovative approaches in the field of peaceful co-existence, ethics development and human values training. Particularly those who make an effort to work on interfaith understanding and sharing.
5. Provide an international voice on behalf of the voiceless in international forums to support the work of women’s and youth organisations in divided societies in the South and champion their causes.

Concrete recommendations to Religious Institutions:

1. Step up advocacy work through the religious institution’s leadership and constituencies to give absolute poverty eradication central global priority in the next decade.
2. Develop training courses in seminar school for religious men and women to build capacity of religious workers in conflict prevention and reconciliation work in the communities.
3. Furthermore, as many religious women work with children in educational and medical services there are good opportunities to work with children on reversing the impact of violence, fear and trauma on their mental development. As this requires specific psychological skills, training and back stopping to these religious workers should be improved and expanded.
4. Develop study and research programmes on new theological contributions to peace building, justice and reconciliation work. E.g. like the WCC proposes to deepen the

- theological analysis on justice and reconciliation, develop a wider network of legal specialists, sociologists and experts in conflict mediation; and explore further the inter-faith dimensions of the questions, or like the Mindful Mediation approach.
5. Beyond study, religious institutions can stimulate action networks in the various regions among themselves and interfaith and provide means by which they can consult and strengthen one another.

Concrete recommendations to Researchers and Research Institutions

1. Most institutions and civil society groups that are active in the field of conflict prevention and resolution are overwhelmed by the work and its urgency and have no time and means to document and reflect on their experience. A group of academics recently concluded that most are ‘well-meaning amateurs’, whose reliability and effectiveness can be increased if necessary steps are taken to professionalize the work, are carrying out most coexistence work. I support the elaborate academic agenda they propose.³⁹ In sum:
2. Help to synthesize and evaluate the extant body of knowledge in conflict prevention;
3. Create training programmes to educate professionals dealing with conflict;
4. Encourage rigorous evaluation research into the effects of conflict prevention and of intervention on the moderation of conflicts.

END

³⁹ Weiner, E, ed. - The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence, New York 2000, p.23.

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