

# Building international alliances in conflict prevention

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*Civil wars are replacing intra-state conflicts and the involvement of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in peace promotion and conflict prevention is similarly changing as they adopt new roles once fulfilled exclusively by governments. These changes demand that agencies improve interaction and consultation among themselves and with the UN, governments and civil society in order to create a global alliance for peace. A series of regional conferences is planned, leading to an action agenda to enhance and support the links between NGOs and civil society.*

## Introduction

The profound changes of recent years have left us in no doubt: traditional power politics and diplomacy are not, on their own, capable of delivering sustainable peace. Yet because modern warfare is so destructive of lives and resources and so unpredictable in its effects, merely reacting to events is no longer an option. The search is on for new forms of intervention. Meanwhile, the nature of conflict has shifted. We see fewer inter-state wars and more civil wars. Also we observe the growing importance of non-state actors in both fomenting and preventing conflict. Even within societies torn by internal divisions, there are

always people working for peace on the ground. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), women's organisations, religious leaders, the business community, media and other civil society actors are all natural allies of the nations and agencies working for peace on the international stage.

NGOs are finding out just what they can and cannot do to promote peace within divided communities. They are increasingly aware of the need to liaise with governments, which in turn are beginning to welcome cooperation with non-state actors. There is an expressed desire to increase the interaction between NGOs and organisations working for peace, in order to create an alliance for peace. As the Carnegie Commission stated: "the prevention of deadly conflict is, over the long term, too hard – intellectually, technically and politically – to be the responsibility of any single institution or government, no matter how powerful. Strengths must be pooled, burdens shared and labour divided among actors. This is a practical necessity."<sup>1</sup>

## **Growth of civil society**

Civil society and the number of NGOs grew rapidly in the twentieth century. They have partly taken over tasks that were previously completely fulfilled by governments. In the last two decades especially, civil society, with its tremendous growth, has had considerable influence on agenda-setting at United Nations (UN) conferences in the fields of development, gender, human rights and the environment. Many civil society organisations (CSOs) are participating in major UN conferences and also other UN activities. They were, for example, highly visible at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and in 2003 CSOs were present during the general debate at the session of the Commission on Human Rights.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, this broad influence is lacking in the fields of peace and security. It is greatly needed to mobilise NGOs working for peace to create an alliance and develop a strong voice.

## **UN and civil society**

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has pledged to move the UN from a culture of reaction to one of prevention. In his Report on the Prevention of Armed Conflict of 7 June 2001, he focuses on the positive potential of a wide spectrum of NGOs currently

engaged in conflict prevention. Article 71 of the UN Charter recognises the contribution NGOs can make to the goals of the UN. Moreover, NGOs can contribute to maintaining peace and security by offering non-violent proposals to tackle the root causes of conflict at an early stage. Also NGOs can play an important role in conducting Track II diplomacy when governments and international organisations are unable to do so.<sup>3</sup> Following the recognition of their important role in conflict prevention, the UN Secretary-General's June 2001 Report urges them to organise an international conference of local, national and international NGOs on their role in conflict prevention and future interaction with the UN in this area.

As mentioned, NGOs working in conflict prevention and peace promotion need to analyse their role and define a channel to reach policymakers, the UN and other institutions. This will achieve the following:

- give NGOs a stronger say and greater influence in policymaking;
- improve interaction, which is important to avoid duplication of activities;
- avoid the preparation and publication of contradictory reports;
- identify gaps in the field.

Besides the more regular consultation needed between NGOs themselves so they can become more complementary in their work, it is necessary to develop more consultation between governments and NGOs as well as between the UN and civil society. We need to discuss with governments and the UN exactly what the added value of civil society is and how we can best complement each other's work. There is therefore, an urgent need to create mechanisms to consult, cooperate and exchange information.

## **A global partnership for the prevention of armed conflict**

In 2002, in response to the recommendation from the UN Secretary-General in his Report on the Prevention of Armed Conflict, the European Centre for Conflict Prevention (ECCP), based in the Netherlands, proposed an integrated global programme of research, consultation and discussion, leading to

an international conference at UN headquarters in New York in mid 2005.<sup>4</sup> Kofi Annan endorsed this ECCP initiative with a letter of support and an intensive period of consultation began within the sector.

This process demonstrated the need for better interaction, a need expressed by all those groups in the world working for conflict prevention and peacebuilding. These groups must speak with a single voice and set up a channel through which they can offer their experience of best practise and lessons learned. The programme initiated by the ECCP in 2002 plays a major role in creating such a network, putting issues on the agenda and increasing the interaction between the UN and civil society.

The overall objective of the programme, the Role of Civil Society in the Prevention of Armed Conflict, is to increase the effectiveness of conflict prevention efforts. To this end the ECCP has created the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict. At the beginning of the programme, the ECCP set up a broad international consultation process, which developed into partnerships in fifteen regions worldwide. The programme has two principal goals:

1. to fully explore the role of civil society and NGOs in the prevention of armed conflict;
2. to improve the interaction between civil society, the UN, regional organisations and governments and thereby achieve a more integrated and coherent approach to conflict prevention.

The process should then hopefully lead to a third goal:

3. to strengthen regional networking and establish a conflict resolution community composed of key NGOs, sub-regional networks, practitioners and academics.

Regional initiators began a process of regional and national consultation and research in the fifteen regions that in the end will lead to a series of conferences in 2004. These regional conferences and the conference at UN headquarters in 2005 should result in an action agenda, containing concrete proposals to support and enhance the role of civil society and NGOs and to facilitate future interaction between civil society and NGOs and the UN. In the framework of the Irish Government's EU presidency in 2004, the Department of Foreign Affairs and the ECCP, in co-operation with the Irish NGO Steering Committee, organised the first regional conference for the European region in Dublin from 31 March – 2 April 2004.

## Panel of Eminent Persons on UN-Civil Society Relations

The commitment from the UN to engage civil society and to increase the interaction between the two, was expressed by the establishment of the Secretary-General's Panel of Eminent Persons on Civil Society and UN Relationships. The Secretary-General announced in his report to the 57th General Assembly that he would "assemble a group of eminent persons representing a variety of perspectives and experiences to review past and current practices and recommend improvements for the future in order to make the interaction between civil society and the United Nations more meaningful."<sup>5</sup> This high level panel was established in February 2003 and is chaired by former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso. The panel is composed of members with complementary backgrounds, including civil society, governments and academia. The main task of the panel is to produce a set of practical recommendations for the Secretary-General on how to improve the relationship between the UN and civil society, as well as with the private sector and parliaments.

In recent years improvements have been made to increase the interaction between the UN and civil society. But still, NGOs working in the fields of peace and security can learn from the successful lobbies in the areas of human rights, the environment, development and gender. Hopefully, with the establishment of the high level panel on civil society and UN relationships, together with the positively evolving programme (the Role of Civil Society in the Prevention of Armed Conflict), the influence on policymaking by the conflict prevention NGOs will be increased, as well as the interaction between NGOs and the UN.

### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict (1997), *Preventing Deadly Conflict: Final Report*, Washington DC, p.xiv
- <sup>2</sup> "UN system and civil society – an inventory and analysis of practices", background paper for the Secretary-General's Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations Relations with Civil Society, May 2003, p.3
- <sup>3</sup> <http://ods-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N01/404/64/PDF/N0140464.pdf?OpenElement>, 32, 1 December 2003
- <sup>4</sup> For information on the work of the European Centre for Conflict Prevention see [www.conflict-prevention.net](http://www.conflict-prevention.net).
- <sup>5</sup> Report of the Secretary-General to the 57th General Assembly of the UN, A/57/387, [www.un.org/reform/pancl.htm](http://www.un.org/reform/pancl.htm), 1 December 2003