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Symposium on Cultural Diplomacy and Human Rights *Collaboration of civil society in preventing genocide and mass atrocities*

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Role Of Civil Society In Preventing Genocide & Mass Atrocities

A Case Study: Liberia

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To some ears, speaking of civil society as an actor in the prevention of large-scale violence can sound presumptuous; however, civil society can do much to promote stability, peace and the respect of human rights in their countries. One reason that some find it so difficult to conceive of a constructive role for civil society in such situations is the way that we have framed our thinking around war and genocide and mass violations of human rights. We tend to limit our thinking to only victims and perpetrators. These are the primary actors in any conflict – or so we think – and so we conclude that any meaningful intervention must come from the outside, not from within the society itself. Moreover, if we frame the conflict in terms of “failed” or “fragile” states – and by implication, failed *societies* and therefore a society which lacks the competence to address a major conflict.

So we have typically brought actors from the outside, believing that external experts are better able to deal with a serious conflict than the people themselves. We may try international diplomacy or solicit the intercession of professional negotiators to broker some sort of agreement. If that fails, we may try to impose sanctions or even resort to armed intervention. These are actions that governments and intergovernmental organisations have taken to address a crisis. These are institutional responses to a crisis.

Broadening Our Understanding of Human Conflict

But what about internal solutions to mass violence? Aside from being just victims or mere spectators to events and forces seemingly beyond their control, how have people organised themselves to prevent the worst from happening? What about the power of normal citizens to affect change in their communities and in society? It is this *citizen power* to affect change that is often disregarded in the political discourse over genocide and mass atrocities.

It is important that we broaden our understanding of human dynamics and of human conflict by moving away from an exclusively institutional approach to conflict and toward an acknowledgement of those capacities that are already present for making and building peace in any given society. It means understanding:

- the complex relationships that are at the root of human conflict;
- the dynamism of human interaction that shape and transform relationships;
- that politics are not just something that institutions do but also what occurs when people organise themselves to change conflictual relationships;
- that civil society can complement and even (re)energise an institutional peace process.

This is about widening the public space in which people work to affect change, not only through institutions but also in those in-between places, those personal and social relationships that we all navigate in our day to day lives. And it is often in this space that real change is most effectively brought about.

The Importance of “Soft Power”

This is the “soft power” or “smart power” that Joseph Nye talks about, the power that comes with the exchange of ideas and values that is critical to cultural diplomacy and to the promotion of peaceful and stable relations in the world today. This soft power is becoming an increasingly important feature of international and inter-communal relations in today’s interdependent world. In today’s world, global public opinion is shaped to a remarkable degree by new communication technologies. It is also shaped by real exchanges between peoples and cultures that would have been unimaginable just two generations ago. This exchange of information and intercultural contacts is becoming all the more important in the 21st century. And the relational aspects of “soft power” are something which civil society is well placed to deliver. Civil society is about people and it has a particular role to play in building relations and preventing violence in society.

It is true that hard power – coercive force – will remain necessary in many situations; however, a growing body of literature is raising questions about some of the long-held and cherished assumptions regarding the use of hard power to resolve human conflicts.

Our recent history has amply demonstrated the limitations of hard power, typically the domain of governments and international institutions, to adequately address deeply-rooted conflicts. We are seeing that many conflicts cannot be addressed by a quick fix of coercive power and do not just go away that easily. In fact, we have seen that armed interventions can often make things worse.

Actions by Civil Society to Prevent Genocide and Mass Atrocities

There are several ways that civil society already actively participates in the prevention of genocide and mass atrocities, for example:

- Data collection, risk assessment and early warning;
- Awareness-raising, the memorialisation of genocide and dealing with the past;
- Civic education and Citizen empowerment;
- Advocacy and the creation of political will;
- Community-based mediation of conflicts;
- Capacity building for social change.

It is the lack of political will to combat exclusionary ideologies that can lay the groundwork for killings and genocide to take place. Genocide does not occur overnight. It is a collective, planned and organised phenomenon which requires a certain environment in which to operate. And governments have a decisive role either in facilitating such an environment or in taking measures to mitigate the conditions in which genocide can occur. This is the question of political will. And this is often the work of a vibrant and independent civil society by interfacing with decision makers and power holders and creating that political will to safeguard the well-being and best interests of the people.

There are many notable projects underway that in fact do take up this work. I reference here the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect, one clearinghouse of information, methodologies and tool kits that merits our attention.

It is necessary to take a multi-disciplinary approach if we are to successfully confront genocide and mass atrocities. This includes not only the methods that we in the West typically associate with violence prevention; customary practices that have been present in traditional cultures for many years can also be accessed in particular contexts.

Sustained Dialogue: An Example of a Community-Based Response

Here I highlight one initiative of a grassroots nature which illustrates a community-based response to conflict through mediation and conflict resolution in a way that reduces the risk of mass killings and human rights violations.

Harold Saunders is a former security advisor to the White House and State Department official. Mr Saunders was heavily involved in US diplomacy efforts in the Middle East in the 1970s and later on in former Soviet states after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Yet throughout his experience in the field of formal mediation and negotiations, he observed that many interventions were taken without sufficiently considering the relational dynamics that were present in those conflicts. And at the same time, he saw the importance of another dynamic that occurred beyond the formal institutional peace process: the informed and intentional interaction between civil society actors for strengthening the peace process and for achieving a sustainable peace.

Harold Saunders developed an approach to resolving conflicts that makes use of the proximity and embeddedness of civil society to affect change. It focuses on the underlying relationships that cause conflicts and not just on the conflicts themselves. This approach he has called *Sustained Dialogue*.

Sustained Dialogue is a structured and interactive process designed to change conflictual relationships over time. In this way, it is different from formal mediation and policy discussions. It is a highly relational process that involves the establishment of a dialogue group, which is composed of 12-15 people that are representative of the communities that are in conflict. These people agree to meet together over a fixed period of time – often for one, two or more years – to intentionally work at community relations. The purpose is to structure regular and systematic contact with the other community, such that that experience of changing relationships can provide a model and a stimulus for changing relationships in the larger community.

Example of Lofa County, Liberia

In 2009, I was involved in setting up and accompanying a Sustained Dialogue in Lofa County in northern Liberia, West Africa, where there is considerable tension between two dominant

communities: the Mandingo, who are mostly Muslim and traders, and the Lorma, agriculturalists who are for the most part Christian or adhere to traditional religions.

To assist in structuring the Sustained Dialogue, I worked very closely with a civil society organisation called DEN-L, the Development Education Network of Liberia.

The Sustained Dialogue process is structured in 5 distinct stages:

- Deciding to Engage: Formation of the Dialogue Group
- Mapping the Problem(s) and Underlying Relationships
- Probing Specific Problems: Defining the Most Pressing Problems, Examining Relationships and Choosing a Direction for Change
- Designing a Scenario of Interacting Steps to Change Relationships
- Putting the Scenario into Action

These steps are not rigid. In fact, the process itself is anything but neat and orderly. But delineating a process from the beginning lay out a structure for moving forward.

It could be that a group successfully passes from Stage One to Two and it appears to be ready to move on to tackling more specific issues. Then something happens within the group which raises the need to go back to mapping the problem and relational links. The group may even need to go back to Stage One and decide all over again that it wants to go on and engage in this process.

Here the choice of moderators is crucial. In collaboration with DEN-L, we recruited two moderators to accompany the process from beginning to end. This meant for this context a Mandingo woman and a Lorma man, who were already skilled in facilitation and group dynamics. We provided further training and set about recruiting the actual dialogue group.

The dialogue group was composed of a *diverse group of Mandingos and Lorma*, drawn from several villages in the targeted area. They were village leaders and simple labourers, young and old, women and men. The one thing they did hold in common was the desire to change the relations between the two communities and to avoid further bloodshed.

The group met together over a two-year period. They set their own pace and decided for themselves the future of the dialogue and where it was headed. The results were impressive. Tensions were eased. Community relations improved markedly. Incidents of crime plummeted. Several inter-communal projects were organised, such as sports events and joint efforts to improve the roads and other infrastructural developments in the area.

Several months into the project, the dialogue group was being hosted in a Lorma village. The meeting ran later than expected and it came time for the Mandingos to do evening prayer; however, they had not brought prayer mats with them. Before the beginning of the Sustained Dialogue, there would have been no assistance offered to accommodate the other group's cultural or religious practices. However, this time the village elder instructed some youths to go cut banana leaves in the forest to provide prayer mats for their Muslim guests. This incident, along with many other such stories, was indicative of improved understanding and mutual respect between the Mandingo and Lorma communities.

These changes attracted national attention on Liberian television, drew support from several political leaders and requests for similar dialogue processes to be set up in other parts of the country.

Summary

- States, governments and institutions play a crucial role in prevention of genocide and mass atrocities; however, these are limited in their ability to access the “soft power” that is necessary to affect deep change in societies.
- We must broaden our understanding of human conflict to understand the complex relationships that give rise to mass violence.
- An independent and engaged civil society is best situated to promote and organise the interactions that are essential to shaping and transforming conflictual relationships.
- Groups of citizens that commit to a systematic and interactive process of sustained dialogue can change conflictual relationships over time.
- As the groups experience change in relationships and design future actions, they become a laboratory for change in their respective communities.
- The deep work of reconciling strained relationships and affecting societal change are the strongest preventative for genocide and mass atrocities. This is often the work of civil society that can complement an institutional peace process.

