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for cultural, economic and social relations

Re-building war-torn
societies: the Role of Non-
Governmental Actors

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It gives me great pleasure to address the Irish Association this evening. I would like to thank Dr Jean Whyte for her kind invitation. It is good to be back in Ireland. As you might know, I was involved in a limited role in the Northern Ireland peace process in 2000-2001. Cyril Ramaphosa and myself worked as international inspectors of the IRA's arms dumps. During that assignment I realised that the Northern Ireland peace process has a history of more than 800 years and even the modern phase of the conflict has been there for decades. Your organisation, the Irish Association for Cultural, Economic and Social Relations has history of almost 75 years in promoting better understanding and reconciliation between peoples, within Northern Ireland, between North and South and between Britain and the island of Ireland.

My topic this evening is the role of the non-governmental actors in war-torn societies - a topic that is not only timely but also challenging. The diversity of NGOs varies greatly in scope, size, resources, impact and visibility. It is estimated that approximately 2 million NGOs exist -- although considering the proliferation of these organisations, and the lack of a reliable global survey, this may be an underestimate.

NGOs can be organisations with one or two people, or they can be associations with millions of individual members. They can be community based or multi-nationally organised, grass roots oriented or policy-oriented. They span the spectrum of missions: they can be research-based, service-oriented, geographically-focused, educationally driven, faith-based, ideologically focused, linked to political parties, engaged in public advocacy or a combination of these.

In fact I was brought to Dublin because of the Board meeting of an NGO - the International Crisis Group. The ICG has very well defined its own niche in the crowded NGO scene. It is an independent, multinational organisation, with over 100 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict. It does extremely important work in drawing the attention of decision makers to hot spots that are in the verge of erupting to conflicts and gives policy recommendations how to avoid it.

The recognition of the importance of the civilian dimension in development co-operation, conflict prevention and post conflict reconstruction has been brought to the fore since the end of the Cold War. And so has the involvement of the non-governmental sector. Many people, especially in the military, tend to have a stereotypical view of NGOs as being either single-issue or service-oriented organisations. It is not only once that I have heard that NGOs are endangering both the local communities and themselves in crisis areas and they should not be allowed in a war-torn country in such large numbers. We of course know that this is only one side of the coin.



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The non-governmental sector has also an enormous capacity and potential in peace-making and peace-building and many comparative advantages.

I would like to divide my talk today into three parts. First I would like to say a few words about the conflicts and crisis with which the international community is struggling. Second I would like to discuss the role of the non-governmental sector, in post conflict reconstruction and development co-operation. Finally, I would like to share some of my ideas on how to bring professionalism and pragmatism in civilian post conflict reconstruction efforts.

The civil wars of the last decade have scarred the world's poorest countries, leaving a legacy of more than five million dead, many more driven from their homes, billions of dollars in resources destroyed, and wasted economic opportunity. In reality, single causes and simple conflict resolution formulas are at odds with the actual challenges. The list of factors that shape the reality is long: the collapse of central institutions, economic difficulties, the history of conflict, the holding of ill-prepared elections, unequal treatment of divergent social and ethnic groups. It seems unreasonable to expect that a single intervention strategy could deal with a large number of issues that are underlying the situation. We have, however, in recent years seen the emergence of certain trends suggesting strong linkages between scarcity, inequality and institutional weaknesses in societies and their abilities to ensure peace and security.

As we have been reminded most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan - or even in Kosovo - there is no such thing as instant stability and democracy. It cannot be imposed upon at a point of a gun, but instead, grown into the different fragments of the society through carefully planned civilian means.

There are also more and more countries that have governments that fail to govern. These governments are unable, or unwilling, to provide security and basic government services throughout their countries. Population increases, declining economies, poverty, environmental degradation, injustice and foreign debts tend to overwhelm local governmental institutions and the results are often failed states that are in the grip of irresponsible warlords, ideological extremists, corrupt family clans or brutal dictators. The list of failed states and those on the brink of failing is unfortunately long.



Failed states are first and foremost humanitarian disasters. The breakdown of law and order tends to produce terrible human suffering through inter-ethnic hatred, indiscriminate killings, displacement of populations, large-scale human rights abuses and the destruction of local economies. But failed states are no longer 'only' humanitarian disasters; they are becoming increasingly a threat to international peace and security. They infect and destabilize neighboring states and even more importantly, failed states are increasingly becoming safe havens for international crime and terrorism, threatening the international community.

This requires much more than military means - a long term state-building process engaging the local communities is vital.

If I had to distil the priorities of a post-conflict mission into three tasks, they would be security, rule of law and economic development. It must be understood that the lasting resolution of a conflict entails much more than the mere ending of hostilities. In order to prevent peace agreements from becoming purely theoretical exercises, it is important to have an implementable plan around which the necessary political will can be generated and to make available the resources that allow the peace process to become self-sustaining.

Still today, after thirteen years of post cold war crisis management, some people see civilian crisis management only a mere annex to military crisis management and peacekeeping. Civilian dimension, including NGOs, is critical to the success of military operations today. The revival and restructuring of national institutions, including the criminal justice administration, and the post-conflict political, social, economic and human rehabilitation tasks, have increased the demand for civilian police and other specialised personnel. Conducting war and securing the peace in 21st century wars is not achievable by generals and political elites alone.

Civilians pick up the pieces and take the lead in reconstructing devastated societies. Civilian efforts are critical to keeping military interventions of limited duration and scope but unless the civilians are harnessed from the early stages of crises, the military is forced to carry out duties that they are not trained to do.

The modern crisis scene is crowded with multiple mediators, military crisis management forces, development agencies, individuals, hundreds of NGOs, the media and private businesses, all seeking to make a change, to alleviate dire conditions - and to be seen. But as no single authority exists that can manage the various responders to crises, international peace-making efforts are often confused, difficult and even chaotic in the field. Kosovo provides a good example of this: in



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early stages of the crisis, an estimated 400-600 aid organisations swarmed the crisis scene. Even today, a plethora of international organisations share the field with hundreds of other minor players, non-governmental organisations, and UN agencies, all of which act in the world of conflict transformation and management.

Due to their political nature, the top-down approach of intergovernmental organisations has been acknowledged as insufficient to create sustainable peace and stability alone. The emergence of what must be hundreds - if not thousands - of non-governmental organisations, has partly been a response to the flaws and inadequacies of the international system.

Non-governmental agencies and organisations can challenge governments in a way governmental agencies simply cannot do.

Governments are often constrained by massive organisation and bureaucracy to be truly innovative in their programmes, or simply cannot stomach taking risks for the fear of political consequences. The non-governmental sector enjoys the advantage of being able to flexibly engage in new projects and adapt to new situations. Due to this comparative advantage, it is no surprise that NGOs have become a vital part of the multi-level and multi-dimensional approaches to peacemaking.

With their grassroots approach, NGOs have the advantage of familiarity with the local conflict environment and getting close to the source of the problem; they can provide informal mediation between parties and encourage them to look beyond territorial, legal, or military issues and focus on issues such as fears, insecurities, misperceptions and misunderstandings, which underpin the conflict. It is a challenge, however, to the NGOs to remain un-compromised, impartial and avoid taking sides or being pulled into national debates particularly in countries that are deeply polarised along political and ethnic lines.

NGOs and other civic groups can play a significant role in the reduction of humanitarian consequences of the conflict, in the increase of human security and in the resolution of the conflict itself. NGOs and other civil society groups can be a driving force behind greater public support for international agreements.

With all their potential, a growing number of development resources are channelled through NGO activity. This has made NGOs a growth-industry with great expectations. But with responsibility also comes accountability - the civil society is not immune to claims of misuse of funds or unethical activities. Securing funds for activities require operational proof, which have sometimes been found exaggerated or illegitimate.



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With the increased understanding on the role of the post-conflict reconstruction and the increased number of NGOs in the field, it is important to take a critical look at their work vis-à-vis the local community, as well as the wider international aid and crisis management community.

The puzzling collection of international aid agencies is not only very costly in delivering aid. They may even have the unintended effect of undermining any newly established national transitional government they have come to support. I would like to argue that in general the international community should strive for much smaller presence and visibility in the post conflict reconstruction phase as is the case today. With this I do not mean less funds or less attention but stronger role for local actors.

Some of the NGOs have become the most powerful and well-funded members of the crisis scene -- the authority they have in local communities is not small. NGOs are often credited - and rightfully so - for their closeness to the local people. Because of their grassroots approach, they are well placed to empower people by drawing on local resources in their work, which provides a solid building block for strengthening civil society and social system.

All good and well, as long as this is carried out in a responsible manner, taking into consideration its effects on the local economy. A close colleague who has worked extensively in Afghanistan before and after the international intervention, gave me an astonishing account of over 40 000 Afghans the international community competed to hire to support their individual missions. Soon after, the same organisations blamed the local government for their lack of success in taking forward reforms.

Intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations should be aware of the consequences of the enormous influence that they have in relation to the local government. How do you build up the local administration and capacity when the professors and engineers that should be working in the ministries are driving cars or working as interpreters because it is better paid?

The local ownership is still far too often only a lip service. Donor funding or other resources are kept within the international aid community who initiates and implements its own assistance programmes - often with only a symbolic involvement of local administration.

In this context I would like to mention the extremely valuable work that the WSP international is doing in its target countries, including Somalia, Guatemala and more recently in Macedonia and Rwanda in supporting local actors in their search for reconciliation between former belligerents.



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Instead of imposing the agenda, WSP International facilitates the local process of defining a common agenda for different groups in the society. This is done through supporting locally driven research that establishes facts and facilitates the consensus building. In this exercise the role of the international community is only a supporting one.

Another good example is the Open Society Institute and its national foundations that are autonomous institutions established in particular countries or regions to initiate and support activities aimed at strengthening open societies. The priorities and specific activities of each foundation are determined by a local board of directors and staff in consultation with the OSI boards and advisors. I have followed the work of the national foundations in Central Asia and Balkans and seen the empowering and enabling role they play.

Finally, international NGOs working in the post-conflict environment should clearly define an exit strategy for their missions. It is too often that missions turn into self-sustaining efforts, which are counterproductive to the genuine development of the local community. All NGOs should start their mission planning and problem solving by internalising the desired end state: to establish accountable governments and to empower the local populations to run functioning civil societies. From this goal, the international community should work its way backward to determine what measures and to what extent are needed to accomplish that goal. Closing a field office should mean mission accomplished.

In this respect the challenges faced by the non-governmental sector are no different from those of the international organisations or bilateral donors. All actors in crisis management should aim, through their work, to make themselves redundant.

Professionalism and pragmatism in civilian post conflict reconstruction efforts

Often the different organisations work on the same problems, plan and take decisions without consulting other organisations or without access to up-to-date and adequate information. While they all need co-ordination, most of them deny any overall coordination, advice and control. The crisis management agents all confront the same set of problems but lack a shared or consistent knowledge, coordination or communications system or user culture.

The complex lines of responsibility and overlapping and diverging missions of these many organisations make coordinating the international response particularly difficult. Nevertheless, that is precisely what responding nations, the United Nations,



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and the non-governmental community are called upon to do in order to alleviate the crisis as quickly as possible, save lives, and return to stability.

What comes to more responsible planning and action, none of the actors in international crisis management scenery can be saved from criticism. While there is no international authority that can bring hold actors accountable for their actions, the inter-governmental organisations are reviewed by the governing bodies of the organisations as well as the media. It should be noted, however, that there is no authority that can hold the thousands of NGOs working around globe accountable for their actions, and their errors can easily go unnoticed.

Division of labour and role specialisation would be beneficial to all. But to what extent can divided roles, or even coordination and cooperation be realised in practise, is another question. There are too many examples of inter-agency rivalry in the field impeding progress and exacerbating what is often an already negative perception of the international operation on the part of the local population. Overlapping mandates often result in tensions and deep-rooted mistrust and the ability of a multi-faceted operation to function. The civilian side of the crisis scene and the military crisis managers and peacekeepers need to set suspicion aside and coordinate their efforts. Both sides should understand the mission objectives and learn from each other.

I have been pleased to notice that the role of the NGOs is currently being recognised in the work of international organisations such as the UN, the OSCE and the EU, and a dialogue on how to better utilise the NGO experience and expertise has been started.

All parties would benefit from shared lessons learned, research on best practises and greater understanding of their mutual interests. I am aware that there is an increasing amount of evaluation and impact assessments carried out but often they are not made public or shared with other organisations. I would like to emphasise the role of the United Nations here, which is the one organisation that can and should remain attentive to the concerns of the full range of stakeholders in war-torn societies.

This interdependence of security and development is a widely acknowledged fact. It was interesting to learn that for example in Macedonia the lack of employment causes more insecurity than the fear of renewal of the ethnic conflict. It is a proven fact that young, idle people can breed trouble. The inter-linkage of security and



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development is highlighted by the fact that countries with high levels of insecurity or violence typically cannot make effective use of reconstruction assistance.

A wider strategy to link development policies and crisis management policy should therefore be further developed not only in international organisations but also in national governments. These two sides of the same coin are often compartmentalised in separate parts of the organisation and work with separate budgets. We should associate crisis management with development as parts of the same continuum and develop a broader, more comprehensive definition of security policy that addresses the causes as well as the effects of armed conflict.

The private sector can contribute to the work of the crisis managers, and I believe that private innovations should be used for fruitful partnerships with the public or NGO-sector. To streamline the running costs of operations, it would be in the interest of all parties to outsource to the private sector many of functions the international organisations still carry out today in their field operations. In the world of diminishing resources, public-private partnerships in crisis management would free the crisis management and humanitarian professionals to do their core business full time.

It is high time the international community - the governmental actors as well as the NGOs - to begin to take jointly stock on lessons learned. We should bring to realisation the fact that even the best of international intentions to build states are not good enough if not done consciously, by learning from past mistakes and in a coordinated and consorted manner. I hope this enhances the humble recognition that we all need each other in the complex work of supporting war-torn societies. I have myself worked in government institutions, intergovernmental as well as non-governmental organisations and I know from experience that no single actor has the right and complete answer but we have much to learn from each other.