CELEBRATING INTERPEACE'S PIONEERING WORK

Reflections on Twenty Years of Peacebuilding

By: Necla Tschirgi*

As Interpeace celebrates its twentieth anniversary, it is instructive to reflect on the evolution of peacebuilding as a field of research, policy and practice in the last two decades. Having been involved in Interpeace since its early days first as the War-torn Societies Project and subsequently as WSP-International, I have been privileged to witness the organization's impressive growth at the same time as the field itself has steadily expanded and gained increasing recognition. Yet, it is also important to acknowledge that during this period peacebuilding has been transformed in significant ways in light of the dramatic changes in the international security environment as well as the new contexts in which it now operates.

For the international community peacebuilding is actually a fairly novel enterprise. The word entered the international lexicon with former UN Secretary-General Boutros-Boutros Ghali's 1992 report An Agenda for Peace. But two years later, participants at WSP's Cartigny meeting in Switzerland agreed that the international community had only a limited understanding of how to assist war-torn countries which needed international support. The War-torn Societies Project was developed to address this gaping hole in the international system and has played a pioneering role in helping to define the field through its innovative methodology and successive field experiences in different contexts. There is little doubt that in the last twenty years, the knowledge base of peacebuilding has grown exponentially. The academic and practitioners' literature on peacebuilding is quite large and constantly growing. There are many academic programs, several professional journals, numerous research institutes and policy and programming units which are dedicated specifically to peacebuilding. Similarly, there are a wide range of governmental and non-governmental organizations actively engaged in peacebuilding, including the new peacebuilding architecture at the United Nations. As a result, policy and practice have evolved in important ways. [1]Yet, peacebuilding remains an ongoing challenge—seriously straining our understanding, re-

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1. For a fuller discussion of this, see Necla Tschirgi, "Rebuilding War-torn Societies: A Critical Review of International Approaches" in Conflict Management and Global Governance in an Age of Awakening edited by Chester Crocker, Pamela Aall and Fen Hampson (USIP, forthcoming).

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sources, tools and instruments. This is partly because it has become an all-inclusive term that means different things to different people. But more importantly, it is because peacebuilding is not a pre-packaged social engineering project but a difficult process of sustained engagement aiming to transform the complicated dynamics that generate conflict and violence in different contexts. Peacebuilding is, thus, the process and not simply the product of such engagement. Interpeace was one of the first peacebuilding organizations to articulate this explicitly in its methodology and, twenty

years later, that basic principle remains at the core of peacebuilding and Interpeace's work. While the problems that require attention continue to change and sometimes become even more intractable, the imperative for building peace through dialogue and trust building remains equally urgent. For the international community, the alternative to peacebuilding is not disengagement; it is deepening conflicts and greater violence which threaten human security as well as global peace.

Ironically, looking back to the early 1990s, it seems that it was

easier to make the case for peacebuilding in the heady days at the end of the Cold War when there was renewed hope for a global peace dividend and a strong belief in multilateral approaches to assist conflict-prone, conflict-torn or post-conflict societies. As protracted Cold War conflicts came to an end and intra-state conflicts and complex humanitarian emergencies were catapulted to center stage in international affairs, there was increased demand for concerted international support for peacebuilding. The new peacebuilding agenda offered an opportunity for innovative multilateral action at a

time when conventional Cold War policies and instruments proved inadequate to address intra-state conflicts and civil wars. Thus, in the first decade after the Cold War, peacebuilding heralded a new era in international cooperation and multilateral assistance with a distinctly humanitarian and developmental impulse. As diverse actors working on human rights, humanitarian affairs, conflict resolution, peacekeeping or development became engaged in conflict-affected countries, there was a proliferation of activities, projects, programs and policies that collectively came to be known as peacebuilding. There was, however, no cohesive or coherent peacebuilding approach. In fact, analysts, practitioners and donors lamented the "strategy deficit" in peacebuilding. [2] Each organization had a distinct methodology and agenda which did not necessarily align with local needs or the contributions of other actors. As a result, peacebuilding assistance was largely supply-driven and tended to be fragmented, ad hoc, and piecemeal. Despite the mantra of local ownership,

2. See, for example, Dan Smith, "Getting Their Act Together: Toward a Strategic Framework for Peacebuilding," synthesis report of the Joint Utstein Study of Peacebuilding, Oslo: The Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1998.

peacebuilding assistance consisted largely of externally-driven projects and programs that were not well-grounded in local realities. It is in this context that WSP-International was able to carve out a special niche by developing a methodology to bring multiple local and international actors into a participatory process of research, analysis and dialogue to identify priorities and to search for long-term solutions.

But in retrospect it is clear that the conflicts of the 1990s as well the international security context were significantly different in nature. Aside from a few exceptions, major countries did not consider intra-state or regional conflicts of that era as posing a direct threat to their own security. Instead, these conflicts were seen as products of local pathologies—largely exogenous to the international system despite their various spillover effects. Despite policy statements on the indivisibility of peace in the post-Cold War era, peacebuilding was approached as a collective enterprise to address problems in zones of conflict at the periphery. Accordingly, the tools of peacebuilding were largely country-specific. With the terrorist attacks on

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the United States on September 11, 2001 the direct links between peacebuilding in the periphery and international peace and security gained heightened attention.

The global war on terror and US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq represented dramatic departures from the multilateral approaches to peace and security that had been gaining ground with the end of the Cold War. After 9/11, state-centric national security doctrines have re-emerged alongside multilateral approaches that are designed to address human security, conflict prevention and peace-

building. Insecurity in distant places is no longer seen as confined to zones of conflict. Instead it has become clear that conflict in the periphery could reach to the very core of the international system via non-state actors, terrorist and criminal networks, failed and failing states. The transnational nature of these threats has inevitably led peacebuilders to shift their focus on local level dynamics and to re-tool themselves to operate in a decidedly more complex security environment. Thus, in many conflict-affected countries ranging from Afghanistan to Yemen, peacebuilding efforts now co-exist

with statebuilding, counter-terrorism and stabilization operations which are often accompanied by military force, thereby causing serious tensions between those strategies at multiple levels. Peacebuilders are constantly challenged to tailor their approaches in order to be effective in this new international environment.

Interestingly, while peacebuilding has come under serious pressure at the international level due to changing security concerns, it has made important headway into other arenas where its methods are in increasing demand. In specific, it

is noteworthy to see the application of peacebuilding tools to deal with a range of problems in urban settings. Whether in the pacification process in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, the gang truce in El Salvador or the simmering tensions between new immigrants and residents in a Stockholm neighborhood, the experiences of twenty years of international peacebuilding in conflict-affected societies offer important insights that are increasingly being put to good use. While the challenges in such settings are significantly different, the lessons of peacebuilding are equally relevant. These lessons are simultaneously very simple and very difficult. First, peacebuilding requires a commitment to solving problems through peaceful means. Second, peacebuilding requires a long-term vision and sustained engagement. Third, process matters greatly, and without a credible, legitimate and inclusive process, there can be little progress toward sustainable peace. Finally, peacebuilding can be practiced at all levels where violence, conflict, and distrust inhibit communication, dialogue and consensus building. The reality, of course, is that these principles are not self-implementing. Peacebuilding requires peacebuilders who do not only understand the importance of these basic principles but have the knowledge, tools, resources and capacity to play the necessary catalytic role in difficult contexts. In the last twenty years Interpeace has not only helped to pioneer the field of peacebuilding, but it has established itself as a courageous peacebuilder in many difficult contexts.

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*Necla Tschirgi, Professor of Practice, Human Security & Peacebuilding
Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, University of San Diego
Interpeace Governing Council