PEACEBUILDING, HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION AND THE FUTURE: SOME REFLECTIONS ON EACH AND ALL FOR THE GENEVA PEACEBUILDING FORUM

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Background Note

Past, present and future

This note is in the first instance about the interface between peace-building and humanitarian action. More fundamentally, however, it is about the viability of both in the face of future, plausible transformations in the global system. To what extent will possible *changes in global governance*, *the dimensions and dynamics of vulnerability*, *the emergence of tactical humanism* and *parallel on-line systems and networks* affect conventional approaches to peace-building and the assumptions that underpin humanitarian action?

In posing the question, this note does not offer any immediate answers or conclusions. It does though suggest that the way we may think about the present has increasingly less relevance about ways to build peace and assist the vulnerable in the future.

Lessons from an uncertain past

Almost five years ago, in a report entitled **In Larger Freedom**, the then UN Secretary-General noted that "roughly half of all countries that emerge from war lapse back into violence within five years." From this he concluded that "at this very point there is a gaping hole in the United Nations institutional machinery: no part of the United Nations system effectively addresses the challenge of helping countries with the transition from war to lasting peace."[1]

It is with this challenge in mind that my colleagues and I were asked in the middle of 2005 to explore one aspect of this gaping hole in the UN's institutional machinery, namely, that to do with the ways that peace-building operations were conducted. The remit was to look for approaches that would result in greater

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[1] ***In larger freedom: Towards development, security and human rights for all.*** Report of the Secretary General. A/59/2005, 21 March 2005

operational coherence and value-added through what became known as "integrated missions."[2]

Of the various complexities that had to be faced, perhaps the one abiding challenge was the relationship between peace-building missions and humanitarian action. The former simply put was inherently "partial"; and consistent with some of its essential support mechanisms such as development, governance and human rights was underpinned by politics and political preference. The latter, however, was ostensibly "non-political", that is to say, that humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality did not allow for preference, but was in fact a non-judgemental obligation to all in need.

The issues with which we struggled in order to reconcile humanitarian action within an integrated peace-building mission framework were various – and all too well known for those who have worked in either or both. Nevertheless our conceptual and operational struggles may be worth briefly repeating for they ultimately tie into issues that need to be explored for the future.

In a very general way, efforts to reconcile independent, neutral and impartial humanitarian action with integrated missions were fraught with definitional problems and operational paradoxes, including the sheer *ambiguity of the humanitarian agenda*, *the nature of humanitarian space*, *competing agendas* and *contending peace-building perspectives*.

The ambiguous agenda. The boundaries of humanitarian action then and today remain in so many ways amorphous and fluid. Where for example does humanitarian prevention, preparedness and response relate to recovery, reconstruction and development? Should humanitarian prevention and preparedness also be circumscribed by humanitarian principles? Means to establish even a broad framework of action and agreement on ways to monitor, evaluate and update operational priorities for humanitarian action do not exist to address such ambiguity;

The nature of humanitarian space. Part of the process of peacebuilding is to promote the role of nascent government in post-conflict situations. SRSGs have been torn between their efforts to place responsibility and authority in the hands of government, including the provision of humanitarian assistance, and their obligations to ensure humanitarian assistance to populations in need in ways that are impartial, appropriate and timely. There, too, is a potential paradox between obligations to protect civilians in armed conflict and humanitarian assistance. The former may require the robust intervention of uniformed peacekeepers, but in so doing, they may inadvertently exacerbate a humanitarian crisis which in turn complicates the ability of humanitarian actors to operate;

Competing agendas. The day-to-day tensions between political and humanitarian objectives can be seen as a paradox between promoting the 'good governance' and 'responsible authority' image of nascent governments and the need

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[2] ***Report on Integrated Missions: Practical perspectives and recommendations***, 19 May 2005

for rapid humanitarian action. In the former, missions – as in the case of Afghanistan – are tempted to endow governments seeking legitimacy with responsibilities for a range of assistance-related activities, including humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian actors on the ground regard such assistance as a form of public relations at the potential expense of human life. In one West African country, an SRSG reportedly encouraged – contrary to the advice of humanitarian organisations -- IDPs and refugees to return to ill-prepared home areas so that they could vote in mission-supported elections;

Contending peace-building perspectives. The main division between uniformed peacekeepers and humanitarians appear to be the dilemmas that confront each side in their respective obligations to protect and save lives. The military arm of UN missions usually intervenes to protect civilians in armed conflict. Humanitarian organisations in many instances regard such action as endangering the lives of civilians but also those humanitarian workers who could have come to their assistance. While in various operations such divisions have been to some extent bridged [eg, the Democratic Republic of the Congo], the stove-piped nature of even integrated missions have made it difficult to deal with such contending perspectives.

These four issues reflect some of the difficulties in reconciling peace-building and humanitarian action in the past and today. To what extent will we be faced with similar challenges in the future?

Possible lessons from a more certain future

Let me now return to *In Larger Freedom* – in order to underscore a point too often overlooked that spoke of a future in which "new circumstances demand that we revitalise consensus on key challenges and priorities and convert that consensus into collective action."[3] It is that future which I feel will need to shape our thoughts about the nexus between what today we call peace-building and humanitarian action. The overarching theme of that future is that the terrain in which we conduct peace-building and humanitarian operations will change sufficiently that the present and past may have little relevance to the future of peace and humanitarian survival in a decade or so time.

The presumptions of post-WWII Western hegemony – no matter how well intentioned – will become increasingly less relevant to our understanding and implementation of peace-building and humanitarian action over the next decade. In so many ways we have to recognise that our efforts to draw lessons about that intersection from the past will have increasingly less relevance as we look to the future.

With this future in mind, let me point to four fundamental transformations that I foresee will affect our involvement in peace-building and in humanitarianism:

- the changing nature of global governance
- the growing centrality of vulnerability

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[3] Ibid #1, *In larger freedom*, para. 7

- the emergence of tactical humanism
- parallel systems and structures

The changing nature of global governance. The emerging nature of global governance will be unusual in modern world history for at least three reasons, the overall consequence of which is that opportunities to engage in peace-building and in humanitarian intervention as an international undertaking will be severely limited in the future.

One of these three factors is the emergence of a fluid multi-polar international structure, where different groupings of actors including entities such as Brazil, China, the European Union, Japan and the United States will align themselves less on sustained common interests and more on opportunistic situational interests. The former has been marked throughout modern history by relatively stable alignments based upon mutual re-enforcing goals and objectives; the latter will be more fluid, dependent upon specific interests at specific times. The impact for peace-building and humanitarian intervention is that access will be even less predictable and consistent than it is today.

This will be further compounded by the growing rise of suzerains and tributaries. Suzerains will form protective shields over states and territories which will in turn play the role of tributaries. One might wonder whether Burma's relative confidence in the way she refused to seek conventional humanitarian assistance following the 2008 Cyclone Nargis might have something to do with her northern neighbour China. One also must wonder, for example, when Chinese resource interests in Sub-Saharan Africa increase if peace-building and humanitarian access might be ever more limited.

Paradoxically, the emergence of transnational ethnic and ideological groupings as factors in governance as well as the *favelas* – or slum conurbations -- of the future will mean that the state as we know it today will have significantly less authority and conventional power. Rather than a single source of authority in tributary regimes, there may be multiple authorities, and that some of the most basic assumptions about peace-building such as re-building state will lack even a modicum of a basic framework.

These three points may be further compounded by "cellular" or parallel governance systems and structures – a point to which I shall return at the end.

The growing centrality of vulnerability. The types, dynamics and dimensions of humanitarian crises are changing. The array of new forms of crisis drivers ranges from nuclear seepage of former Soviet radio-active waste deposits in Central Asia to the impact of computer hacking upon global economic and physical infrastructures. There will be more and more crises of the future that will be interactive, that will have compound effects and that will occur simultaneously. "The affected" will no longer reflect the "hapless south," but will include a growing number of communities – north and south.

In the context of peace-building and humanitarian intervention, there are two key consequences. The first is that vulnerability, *per se*, will become a deep and abiding issue for governments and governance. This point perhaps is better understood if one looks back over the past three decades where "disasters" and "emergencies" were normally regarded as aberrant phenomena – divorced from normal life. Increasingly it is now accepted that rather than aberrant phenomena, humanitarian crises are reflections of normal life, of the ways that societies are structured and allocate their resources.

The future therefore suggests that humanitarian crises will increasingly be at the core of governance concerns. In other words, societies will increasingly have to come to terms with a range of potential threats that will bring the issue of vulnerability to the heart of the political process. This is not to suggest that "gloom and doom" will not be offset by a plethora of scientific, social scientific and technological innovations and understanding; but rather to emphasise that whereas humanitarian issues might not have been a core concern to government, in the future they will be at the heart of government. They will be reflected in issues of vital concern to the very functioning of society and state, including water, food security, livelihoods.

Hence, humanitarian crises and vulnerability will become deeply political issues – issues so fundamental that they will not readily be relinquished to well intentioned international actors.

In suggesting the growing politicisation of humanitarian issues, one is also recognising that such issues will increasingly be the source of future conflicts. This realisation is reflected in many ways. There is a growing recognition that "water wars" and urban violence are examples of conflict not that far away. The nexus, therefore, between vulnerability, humanitarian issues and peace will increasingly be issues that go to the very nature of state survival, and suzerains and tributaries will be far less inclined to rely on the peace-building/humanitarian capacities of those present approaches and structures for support.

Emergence of tactical humanism. As one reflects upon the changing nature of global governance, one must at the same time ponder the extent to which "humanitarian principles" continue to reflect an emerging Western hegemony that takes us back to the age of discovery in the 15th and 16th centuries, to the age of industrialisation, colonialism and economic dominance of the 18th and 19th centuries – past Solferino – and into the 20th century. Put another way, to what extent have our principles In a world in which different power structures will emerge, with their concomitant local and regional perspectives and values, to what extent will those engaged in humanitarian affairs have to deal – in the words of the anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai – with tactical humanism.[4]

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[4] "…tactical humanism does not believe in the equal claims of all possible moral worlds. It believes in producing values out of engaged debate….Such tactical humanism will need to recognise that we cannot rely any more on the moral certainties of the nations; that we have entered a period when the right to be civilian may have to be painstakingly rebuilt; that for the foreseeable future cellular networks may outpace other forms of global governance; and that we

It is difficult to imagine that the message of the Good Samaritan may not be universally applicable. And yet, the words of an ICRC delegate a couple of years ago still resonates when he recounted discussions he had had in the Middle East to explain the presumed universality of *independence*, *neutrality* and *impartiality*. "Yes, we understand your principles," said a Saudi representative involved in the discussion. "We, too, have principles. One of ours is justice. Where does that fit into your principles?"

Without dwelling on the metaphysical nature of that discussion, it does nevertheless force us to consider the extent to which our traditional humanitarian principles and values are indeed universal, whether or not the nature of different societies and social constructs offer traditions and perspectives that in turn result in different values and principles. This, however, is not to suggest that one has automatically to concede – as the relativist might – that principles and values are solely dependent upon the context in which one is working, that there are no "universals", but rather that the humanitarian principles which we use to justify our actions may not be seen as "axiomatic" by others. Tactical humanism in that sense does not believe in the equal claims of all possible moral worlds, but it does assume that principles and values will be produced out of engaged debate.

Here, as one looks to the future, even the weapon of principle for the traditional humanitarian actor may not go unchallenged.

Parallel systems and structures. This fourth issue could readily have fit in the earlier discussion on changing government and governance structures. It is, however, discussed separately because it also offers a distinct message about issues of control and influence that transcend conventional systems of government and governance. In one way or another one assumes that the physical manifestations of government, governance, peace-building and humanitarian assistance are all important. And yet, perhaps one of the most transformational characteristics of the 21st century has to do with on-line systems of collaboration and communications. Control, influence, resources are less and less the purview of conventional organisations and systems, and more and more the products of networks and partnerships which are "on-line".

For example, "information communities are networks of individuals and/or organisations that *rendez-vous* around an information commons, a collection of information that is open to all on an equal basis."[5] They will, according to one leading expert, be increasingly empowering to fragmented groups, where members may for the first time gain access to a great deal of rich and fresh information of mutual

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may see more diagnostic wars hat seek the enemy, and their own justice, post factum. In such a world we may need to cease to take universals for granted and begin to practice the art of constructing them one emergency at a time. This is a hard prospect but perhaps our best one: a humanism prepared to negotiate across borders unaccompanied by any non-negotiable universals." Arjun Appadurai, Tactical Humanism, in Jerome Binde [ed], *The Future of Values: 21st Century Talks*, UNESCO Publishing, Paris, 2004, p.18
[5] Eric von Hippel, *Democratizing Innovation*, MIT Press, Boston, 2006, p.84

interest. Already "the behaviours and infrastructure for success are being increasingly learned and codified."[6] They are being used to mobilise coalitions to force through change in developing as well as developed countries,[7] and are increasingly used to generate funds for particular objectives *via* "crowdsourcing."

Such parallel structures offer new and challenging dimensions for problem-solving as well as for advocacy and accountability. They directly relate to such phenomena as the influence of the Diaspora and remittances, and clearly serve to garner the opinions and influence of religious and ethnic groups trans-nationally. One could well foresee a time when structures and influence in terms of governance will have more to do with loose networks of on-line *ad hoc* intervention than the heavy machinery 20th century physical presence.

In lieu of a conclusion

To the extent that the four factors which have been mentioned above are plausible they inevitably will change the context in which peace-builders and humanitarian actors will operate. In so saying one must wonder to what extent such factors will impact upon the assumptions that have sustained international institutions and multilateral organisations over the past six decades. They, too, must lead one to ask what in the foreseeable future will be the scope and ambit of peace-building and humanitarian action; and in asking that, is it not intriguing to consider the extent to which those still uncertain lessons concerning the interface between peace-building and humanitarianism may suggest anything about its future?

Randolph Kent
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[6] Ibid #5, Eric von Hippel
[7] See, for example, The Economist, 6 September 2008]