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Sustaining Peace.
Can a new approach change the UN?

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In his first statement to the United Nations (UN) Security Council in January 2017, the new Secretary-General, António Guterres, emphasised that the UN must do more to prevent war and sustain peace. Prevention is on the top of the agenda because the human and economic costs of managing conflict have reached levels that are over-whelming the international system.

Not only has the number of wars more than tripled since 2010 (according to the definition of the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (HIIK)), but the scope and intensity of the violence has also increased. One of the results is that 65 million people have been forcibly displaced, the highest number since World War II. The global humanitarian appeal for 2017 was a record US-$23.5 billion; 93 million people are currently in need of assistance.

This is why the UN General Assembly and the Security Council passed concurrent resolutions on 27 April 2016, adopting a new approach called 'sustaining peace', which is aimed at significantly bolstering the international effort to prevent the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict. In January 2018, the Secretary-General released his first report on how he will implement and operationalise the sustaining peace approach. On 24 and 25 April 2018, the President of the General Assembly will convene a high-level dialogue on peacebuilding and sustaining peace to assess efforts undertaken and opportunities to strengthen the UN's work in this area. This paper takes stock of how the concept has developed since it was adopted; it assesses challenges with its implementation and offers recommendations for its operationalisation.

Leveraging the whole UN system to sustain peace

The sustaining peace resolutions were negotiated and adopted in response to the findings of the UN's peace operations, peacebuilding architecture and women, peace and security reviews in 2015. The sustaining peace concept was informed and inspired by the new Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (2015), underpinned by 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In his sustaining peace report, the Secretary-General says that the Agenda 2030 "contains the blueprint of the common vision of society towards which the world is trying to move."

The Agenda 2030 recognises that there can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development. SDG16 is the main goal for "fostering peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence," but in all, 36 targets across seven SDGs measure aspects of peace, inclusion or access to justice. The SDGs thus contain a shared results framework that spans the development, governance and peacebuilding nexus, and that can be utilised to underpin the sustaining peace approach and align it with the more comprehensive SDG agenda.

The sustaining peace approach is a comprehensive project that is aimed at prioritising prevention by changing the way the UN has managed conflicts since the end of the Cold War. The sustaining peace approach unfolds simultaneously across four dimensions:

- First, it shifts the primary agency for sustaining peace from the international to the national and local level;

- second, it leverages all functional areas of the UN – human rights, humanitarian, women, development, peacebuilding, peace operations and political – to generate sustaining peace outcomes;

- third, it broadens the institutional responsibility for peace from the UN secretariat to the whole UN system, i.e. for the first time, the whole system contributes to one overarching goal – to sustain peace; and

- fourth, it broadens the instrumental focus of the UN beyond its current emphasis on a just in time capacity to respond rapidly to emerging violent conflict. It adds a new focus on supporting national actors to develop the resilient national capacities they need to address structural inequalities, exclusion and other drivers that undermine social cohesion, and if neglected, may over time lead to violent conflict.

The new Secretary-General has rallied behind the sustaining peace concept. Through separate management, development and peace and security reforms, he is attempting to put in place the leadership, management, coordination, planning and funding instruments necessary to ensure that these four dimensions of sustaining peace are integrated and aligned to generate a whole-of-UN effect.

If one has to single out one dimension that distinguishes the sustaining peace approach, then it will have to be its focus on the primary role of national governments to identify, drive and direct priorities, strategies and activities for sustaining peace. The resolutions emphasise that inclusivity is key to advancing national peacebuilding processes and objectives in order to ensure that the needs of all segments of society are taken into account. They highlight that sustaining peace should be broadly understood as a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society. They further clarify that sustaining peace is a shared task and responsibility that needs to be fulfilled by the government and all other national and local stakeholders, including civil society.

An important concept that has emerged in the peacebuilding literature in this regard is resilience. If a society is fragile, it means that the social institutions that govern its politics, security, justice and economy lack resilience. Resilience refers here to the capacity of these social institutions to absorb and adapt in order to sustain an acceptable level of functioning, structure and identity under stress. In this context, prevention is about building resilient national capacities for sustaining peace, and is primarily a governance and development challenge.

Sustaining peace is thus not, in the first place, a UN or international project. It is a national project. The role of the UN system and international partners is to help build resilient national and local capacities for sustaining peace.

Unleash the transformational energy of women and youth

The sustaining peace approach also reaffirms the indispensable role of women in peacebuilding. It recognizes the substantial link between women's full and meaningful involvement in efforts to prevent and resolve conflict, and those efforts' effectiveness and long-term sustainability. The best predictor of a country's ability to sustain peace is how it treats its women. The larger the gender gap between the treatment of men and women in a society, the more likely it is that a country will experience conflict.

The sustaining peace approach also recognizes the important role youth can play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and as key driver of sustainability and inclusiveness. The Independent Progress Study on Youth and Peace and Security (2018) provides a framework for partnering with and investing in young people to prevent violence, to promote their inclusion and to translate the demographic dividend into a peace dividend. The report recommends three mutually reinforcing strategies: First, it is critical to invest in young people's capacities, agency and leadership through substantial funding support, network-building and capacity-strengthening, recognizing the full diversity of youth and the ways young people organise. Second, systems that reinforce exclusion must be transformed in order to address the structural barriers limiting youth participation in peace and security. Third, partnerships and collaborative action where young people are viewed as equal and essential partners for peace must be prioritised.

Challenges and opportunities

As one would expect with such an ambitious agenda for change, several challenges – each of which also presents us with opportunities – have emerged thus far during the implementation of the sustaining peace approach.

Geo-political uncertainty

The sustaining peace project is being initiated during a turbulent period in global governance. A phase-shift is underway from a unipolar to a multipolar world order. Some have responded by turning their backs on multilateralism and by reverting to nationalism and populism. Most rely on the UN that, despite its imperfections, is the only globally representative body where international disputes can be settled peacefully, and common agendas like climate change can be negotiated and pursued. Organisations like the UN are often more open to change during periods of disruption than they are during periods of stability. States are, however, likely to be more cautious and reforms can thus be expected to unfold gradually, rather than rapidly.

Some states from the Global South have expressed concern that the sustaining peace agenda, and especially its conflict prevention elements, can be used by the Global North as an entry point for interfering in their domestic affairs. Some have also expressed concern that it represents a politicisation and securitisation of development, and that it may re-direct development funding away from long-term development towards short-term prevention initiatives. Some in the Global North are concerned that if they support the sustaining peace initiative, they are going to be under pressure to contribute more to multilateral institutions, and especially the UN.

Although the sustaining peace resolutions were a member state initiative, there is now growing unease among some member states about how such an approach may affect their interests. The Secretary-General, with the support of like-minded member states, needs to maintain momentum and expand support among key member states in the North and South. He needs to invest more time in listening too, and taking confidence building steps to address the concerns of both blocs. Member states need to show more strategic patience, accept that reforms will need to be introduced gradually so that they can be integrated with minimum negative disruption, and keep their eye on the medium- to longer-term benefits of making the UN more fit for the challenges of the 21st century.

Conceptual and operational vagueness

Ever since the sustaining peace approach was first introduced via the twin resolutions, it faced criticisms that it was not specific enough to be operationalised. The Secretary-General's January 2018 report has also been criticised for the same reason. The Secretary-General should resist these pressures and give member states, the UN system and the international peacebuilding community more time to collectively take ownership and develop the concept further. Member states should be encouraged to make use of the mechanisms designed to coordinate and track the Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 17 that deals with international partnerships, to collaboratively develop the structural prevention elements of the sustaining peace concept, and to align it closely with the larger SDG agenda.

Conceptually, the main tension in the sustaining peace approach is between the degree to which the emphasis should be on investing in imminent risk prevention tools, such as those in the preventive diplomacy toolbox, versus investing in structural prevention. Some argue that the success of sustaining peace will depend on it being able to demonstrate tangible results in the reduction of conflict in the short-to-medium term. It thus requires significant investment in scaling up the UN's preventive diplomacy efforts. Others argue that prevention cannot be sustainable unless the emphasis lies on strengthening the resilience of national capacities for sustaining peace. This implies a focus on the country-level capabilities and an investment in mechanisms such as the Resident Coordinator system and in the joint peace and development advisor program.

The Secretary-General has attempted to find a balance between these two approaches. Both are needed, but member states have a special role to play when it comes to structural prevention, especially in taking the lead to strengthen their own national capacities for operationalising the sustaining peace approach. The SDGs, and especially SDG 16, can serve as a basis for strengthening resilient national capacities for peace.

Innovative financing models

The delayed effects of destroyed infrastructure, poor health care and lost education linger on for generations. The more we spend on responding to conflict, the less is available for development, reconstruction and peacebuilding, without which we cannot prevent future conflicts. The sustaining peace approach is premised on the assumption that investing in preventing future violent conflict will cost the international system significantly less than the down-stream costs of managing the effects of violent conflict. The joint UN-World Bank report on inclusive approaches to preventing violent conflict, entitled 'Pathways for Peace' (2018), predicts even in its most pessimistic scenarios a net saving of close to US-$5 billion a year. In its neutral scenario, over US-$34 billion in damages would be prevented per year in countries that avoid war, and the saving for the international community in responding to such crisis would amount to US-$1.2 billion per year.

Currently, the UN Secretariat spends approximately US-$7 billion on peacekeeping, whilst less than a

billion dollars is spent on prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding. If the UN is serious about prevention, more will need to be invested in the UN's capacity to identify, analyse and assess early warning signs, and to take early action via its regional offices, special political missions and peace operations, and its special envoys.

Both the sustaining peace resolutions and the report of the Secretary-General have paid special attention to work undertaken by the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF). The Secretary-General's report calls for a five-fold scaling up of the PBF, and it makes a number of suggestions regarding how this can be done via, amongst others, utilising unspent funds, re-investing saving and diversifying available resources. Most of the remainder of the proposed reforms are meant to be achieved with the re-prioritising of existing levels of resources.

It is not possible to reform the UN without also changing the way we finance the UN. The cost-benefit scenarios show that investing more money up-stream in prevention will result in us spending less money down-stream on conflict management. We know that if we don't change our business model, the amounts of funding needed for conflict management, now and in the future, is unsustainable. Member states must thus come together to find new and innovative ways to finance development and peacebuilding, so that we create incentives for the system to focus on prevention and sustaining peace.

Conclusion

The sustaining peace project is the most serious attempt to prioritise prevention in the way the UN manages conflict since Boutros Boutros-Ghali's 1992 Agenda for Peace. What sets it apart is that it is a member state initiative, born out of the twin peacebuilding architecture review resolutions of 2016. The Secretary-General is tasked with spear-

heading its implementation. He has embraced the approach and integrated it into his own reform agenda. Member states, civil society and the UN system need time to process the concept and to align their own structures, mechanism and instruments to the new approach. The sustaining peace project has to be a collaborative project, anchored among the member states, if it is going to be truly transformational. If we are not able to reduce the number of conflicts, humanitarian assistance costs alone are predicted to rise to US-$50 billion per year by 2030.

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