



World Chronicle

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Conflict Prevention at the Local and Regional levels

The United Nations was created 60 years in the name of “We, the Peoples.” But to what extent does an international organization of 191 governments actually reflect the needs and aspirations of “the peoples”? What is the role of grassroots movements in preventing armed conflict? What initiatives are being taken by NGOs (Non-governmental Organizations) to build sustainable peace in their communities? How can these civil society groups build better partnerships with governments and with the UN?

These are some of the questions explored in this special edition of World Chronicle focused on the role of civil society in building peace and preventing armed conflict.

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ANNOUNCER: From the United Nations in New York, an interview programme on major global issues. This is **World Chronicle**. And here is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

JENKINS: Hello, and welcome to this special edition of World Chronicle. I'm Tony Jenkins. The United Nations was created 60 years ago in the name of "We, the Peoples". But to what extent does an international organization represented by 191 governments actually reflect the needs and aspirations of the peoples? What is the role of people, and of their grassroots organizations in preventing armed conflict? What local and regional initiatives are being taken by NGOs – Non-governmental Organizations – to build sustainable peace in their communities? And how can these civil society groups build better partnerships with governments and with the UN? These are some of the questions we'll be exploring in our discussion today...Please join me in welcoming: from Kenya, George Wachira, of the Nairobi Peace Initiative for Africa; from Serbia, Tatiana Popovic, of the Nansen Dialogue Network for Western Balkans...and from Lebanon, Samuel Rizk, of the Arab Partnership for Conflict Prevention and Human Security. Welcome to you all.

George, I'm going to start with you. Tell me what can civil society organizations do to prevent conflict that the government can't? Are you just talking shops? What do you do?

WACHIRA: First we begin by the recognition that governments anywhere in the world have a primary responsibility to provide security, ensure peace in all countries, that is a given. But what we realize many times is that governments are not always able to engage at particular levels of dealing with conflicts. For example, conflicts happen mostly at community levels, they do happen at community levels, they happen at levels where we as civil society are well positioned because we have a wider reach within the communities, and so we are able to access in many ways that governments are not able to do.

JENKINS: You are basically saying governments tend to be too big and cumbersome and...

WACHIRA: They tend to be too big and sometimes they tend to be part of the problem within the conflict and they will not always be acceptable actors especially where when you are dealing with community conflicts.

JENKINS: We will come to some of that in a moment, I guess. But Tatiana, I wonder if you could give me a specific example of the kind of thing that George is talking about, that you

have done in the Balkans that has brought people together to talk or to prevent conflict where if you had not done that you might have seen people picking up guns again.

POPOVIC: Yes, I think that the regional South Serbia is a good example for that because we, we had spill over from Kosovo conflict at one point but then many organizations started working there, connecting people and these were mostly inter-ethnic dialogue activities so we would bring local representatives, local authority representatives, Serbs and Albanians to come and talk, discuss important issues and regularly they started cooperating much better at municipal level. At one...

JENKINS: So in other words, you provided a catalyst of just getting these people together and talking, that's all it took and they started to work cooperatively...as a result?

POPOVIC: That is only the starting point to talk and to learn how to listen to each other because they themselves said that that was the greatest problem that they were not listening to each other's needs and then we also have...

JENKINS: Why would...why would you, an outsider- I believe you are from Ukraine originally?

POPOVIC: No, I'm originally from Serbia.

JENKINS: You are, OK. But why would they listen to somebody like you coming into their village who nobody really knows? What can you do to make them talk that they couldn't do before?

POPOVIC: That's first of all because we are ourselves ordinary people, because we are working in NGOS, and we usually work, me and my Albanian colleagues, we organize jointly those activities. So that's why they trust us. So it's not only one side that tries to connect two sides and they trust that we are neutral because we are friends with each other.

JENKINS: And the mere fact that you are not from the government is something that actually helps...gain trust?

POPOVIC: Yes, it helps a lot.

JENKINS: Sorry George...

WACHIRA: Can I say something here? There is sometimes power in weakness. The fact that you can go into a situation where people recognize right from the beginning you do not have a vested interest as say governments or a big actor would have, that you are going there because you are showing a genuine concern for the problem that these people are faced with. If you can begin from that point, be able to convince the people you want to act with that you

have a genuine shared concern about the conflicts they are facing and you have no vested interest in the outcome of the conflicts you are more likely to be an acceptable actor.

JENKINS: That's interesting, but you know, Samuel, before we started taping the show, George was talking about how one of the first things he usually tries to do when he gets people together to talk is to talk about context, so that they - everybody - is starting off from the same spot basically I guess. But it seems to me that in your situation the last thing you want to do really is talk about context because if you start talking about context in the Middle East, you are talking about two groups of people who have completely different sets of facts and if you try and reconcile those sets of facts you will never get past square one. Do you ...when you do your sort of work, do you tend to leave context behind and try and get people to focus on the future?

RIZK: Well, first just a word about context. We are not ignorant or ambivalent of the context that we live in as an Arab partnership or as Arab organizations and understand very well the complexities that some of the conflicts in which we live. But the way to deal with context at this point, we have found, is to ensure that there is respect for international law and international governance and so that is how we deal with context. However, we do not actually say that all the conflicts that we actually have are regional in nature or only about the Arab-Israeli conflict, or what's happening at Palestine/Israel. We also understand that there are many local and community based conflicts that we also have to deal with, some related...

JENKINS: Interestingly we never hear about this, of course, in the news. As far as we're concerned, in the major media markets the conflict in the Middle East is all about Arab and Jew and what you are saying is, no, there are plenty of other things that are catalysts for conflict but have nothing to do with that?

RIZK: Sure and it's not-

JENKINS: For example?

RIZK: For example, you look at... I mean there are people who think that basically all of the Arab world is homogenous or monolithic, that we are all Muslims. However, there is very wide a range of diversity in each of these different countries. You go to a place like Lebanon where you have 18 different confessions. A place like that has had a civil war that has gone for about 17-18 years. Effectively, as it ended, there *were* organizations that are now part of the Arab partnership that wanted to move people past the civil war mentality and basically what

they did was also bring people together from the different warring parties who were just fighting together into forums where they can actually talk-

JENKINS: You anticipated my next question. I was just going to ask you if you do as Tatiana does and bring in somebody from the other side. I mean, in other words do you bring Jewish organizations in to help you as part of this conflict resolution work that you do?

RIZK: At this point we are a partnership within the Arab world of Arab NGOs that are working...conflict prevention, human security, peace building and the such. However, we do have in our partnership Palestinian partners who in fact as part of their everyday life they deal with Palestinian-Israeli issues, people who work on conflict prevention and human security and try to harmonize between people in Palestine, that is their prerogative, we support that kind of work. However...

JENKINS: Slightly different though. It's not exactly incorporating Jewish organizations, it's incorporating people who have experience of dealing with Jewish institutions, I guess.

RIZK: Again and it's because it's within that local context that we support as a collective partnership what each and every country actually does. So we support that, we support others in Sudan doing what they feel, we support others in Syria or in Lebanon or in Egypt or in Jordan and like I said we are not ambivalent or ignorant of the context in which we live.

JENKINS: All right, so here's the next question. We are sitting in the United Nations. This is a building where people talk a lot. There is a lot of hot air in this building. It doesn't necessarily always prevent conflict. What do you say to people who say you are just a talking shop, you get people together to talk but at the end of the day, you are not doing anything to stop somebody picking up a gun? George, have you got a specific example that- of where you have done one of your workshops, one of your programs, where you *know* that it actually has prevented a conflict?

WACHIRA: Well, yes, I can talk about situations where we have done things and we felt it has changed the nature and the course and the intensity of conflict.

JENKINS: Tell us about it.

WACHIRA: I will give two examples. One, since 1992 my organization partnering with another organization in Kenya, the National Council of Churches of Kenya, worked under very very difficult circumstances, in a conflict that had both a political and ethnic content in it. It was very difficult because the government was not supportive of the initiative because the very fact of people working on that conflict did threaten the position of the government.

JENKINS: In other words the government likes to exploit differences between ethnic groups.

WACHIRA: Yes, it happened- it would be a long story. It happened within the context of a changeover from single party politics in Kenya to multi party politics and the government had a position that wasn't very inviting of multi-partyism and they did certain things including inciting ethnic sentiments to slow down the move towards multi-partyism.

JENKINS: So you came in? What were you supposed to do?

WACHIRA: We came in and helped the communities that had been caught in this, begin processes of dialogue of understanding really what was happening, first of all that change is inevitable. The country is moving forward and the world of moving forward, we are all becoming much more democratic and we cannot have a country in its own cocoon that refuses to recognize that we are democratizing. But doing that in the context of tremendous difficulty in terms of you have the intensity of conflict to deal with, people have died in their thousands, thousands more, hundred of thousands, have been misplaced and displaced and yet you have to watch your back because the government doesn't want you to do it. But creating the confidence of the communities up to the point where they were now able to recognize that indeed we owe it to ourselves and to the nation to move forward with this and eventually they are taking the ownership of the process and creating community based infrastructure that up to date continues to monitor any tensions that arise, have early warning mechanisms at community level that are actually functioning as we talk today.

JENKINS: Tatiana...you- again we were talking earlier about what it is that causes conflicts. When people think of the Balkans they usually call it a religious conflict now they are an awful lot of experts who say it had absolutely nothing to do with that. And, in fact, the people were right to be exploited but what made them right to be exploited was not because of religious or any ethnic differences but something else, usually economic. Has that been your experience? And is part of your effort to get people to talk about what's really causing them to be frustrated and angry rather than what they are being told by the people who want to manipulate them. Is that the sort of thing that you do?

POPOVIC: Yes, partly it is. There are many causes that cause conflict in the Balkans. To call it only religious conflict would be oversimplifying, definitely. It was only one aspect with which politicians played with, actually, and since we were Communist society for fifty years religion was not really influential any longer in early nineties. So if these were economical

reasons, political reasons different interests of politicians, first of all individuals were also very important-

JENKINS: Do you get-

POPOVIC: but also- May I finish first? I also think that after the time the European Union didn't recognize what was building up in the Balkans and they probably didn't have capacities to deal with it immediately. No one actually believed that it would happen, that a real war would happen. They considered it to be some tangents and so on, so we didn't get the help from international community in a timely manner also.

JENKINS: You know, I want to ask you about the...specifically about the role of women and then I will follow up with another thought you just put in my head. How much, how valuable are women in this process? I mean typically we are told that women aren't the ones who go to war and that if women ruled the world we wouldn't have so many wars. Sometimes it's a slightly sexist assertion I think. But what- Has there been a specific role of women in this, in this process?

POPOVIC: I think that women were important in the re-building relationships in the Balkans and in the reconciliation process.

JENKINS: Why?

POPOVIC: Because they were first to dare to organize such organizations for trauma and healing for example, then for missing persons also, helping each other to find their relatives across the border, and probably because it was also easier for them to move in the region because you know male representatives would be forbidden to go to Croatia or to Bosnia or wherever you know, so it was more accessible for women, and also they dared to do that first. They felt the need actually to reconcile society. I think that that emotional, if I may call it that, part is really very important for reconciliation.

JENKINS: George...

WACHIRA: Just a word on the...role of women and the recognition first of all that they form a big part of what we call civil society. In the global conference in July here at the UN headquarters, there were amazing stories that were shared from around the world, but I'm more familiar with the ones that came from Africa because in some way I'm connected with them. First of all in West Africa a group, known as WIPNET, doing tremendous work in the peace process in Liberia up to the point that where you can *clearly* say they were part of the

solution to the conflict- to the head of the conflict to the departure of the former president Charles Taylor. In Somalia...

JENKINS: I remember the scenes of seeing women carrying the dead bodies of their children and climbing the mountains and it's against the US embassy.

WACHIRA: That's part of what gives women the authority and legitimacy to really engage from that perspective in peace building because they...bring us to this world and therefore they have the pain also of losing their children during conflict. They play a tremendous role in peace building.

JENKINS: A quick reminder: this is **World Chronicle**. We'll be right back after this break.

AUDIO IN:

"To move several bodies....."

AUDIO OUT:

".....this world will do what we say."

JENKINS: You know there are a lot of cynics here at the United Nations, you wouldn't believe, but there are some, and I've heard one cynical comment about the sort of work that you do, which was, oh, sure, these guys, people, getting people to get together and traditionally Americans would say to sing "Kumbaya", wouldn't have prevented the genocide in Rwanda. Sam you haven't been in this conversation for a bit. Is that fair? Could your sorts of organizations have prevented a genocide in Rwanda, do you think?

RIZK: Well, if you understand civil society organizations role to mean that we are going to take over the role of government or the responsibility of government, no we are not looking to do that. Preventing violent conflict at such a scale continues to be the main responsibility of governments. I think we heard that from the government representatives who spoke at our Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict Conference as well as from the Under-Secretary-General who spoke about, we can do all kinds of things but if governments do not have the political will and the responsibility to actually prevent these kinds of conflicts, continuous death and violence will happen. At the same time one of our roles is not only to cooperate with governments where we can to complement their work, but also to advocate, where we see that there are holes that need to be filled or in places where we think that the government should be going in one place and it's not doing that, that is the role of civil society

organizations. Some people say that it's what is called the prophetic role, perhaps, but at the same time it's not the...

JENKINS: The government's conscience in a way really isn't it?

RIZK: Sometimes, yes, it's not always about advocacy, sometimes it's always complementary.

JENKINS: Is that how you see it, Tatiana?

POPOVIC: Yes, I think that a very important aspect of global partnership for the prevention of armed conflict is that partnership with different actors of society, and that is governments and that is regional organizations, international organizations and first of all the UN. The UN is really the most important for us. So it is very important to connect at a regional level and at a global level.

JENKINS: I'm sorry to put you on the spot but I've got to ask this again. If the sort of organization that you guys have founded and worked so hard to establish, had been around in the early days of when the tensions were rising in the Balkans do you think you could have prevented some of those wars? Is that what or is that too much to ask of what you do?

POPOVIC: Yes, I think that it could be possible really. I don't claim that we could have prevented the Balkan wars but if they had let us do some of the job that we wanted to do at the time then maybe we could improve understanding in [unclear]...

WACHIRA: I think for me if I think about Rwanda, that I am familiar with, I don't know so much about the Balkans, I believe the genocide, not the conflict, the conflict was already there, but the genocide in Rwanda could have been prevented. Part of what I see...

JENKINS: How would you have done it?

WACHIRA: Let me first say what I see as a problem. It's a way we understand peace building, peace making processes as residing in particular levels, usually the preserve of state actors. This whole process that we are part of is trying to say that you cannot leave peace making to just state actors because only particular things can happen at the level of the state. You need to involve the people that are the victims of the violence in the conflict. You need to involve civil society if you want to have meaningful peace making processes. So in Rwanda...

JENKINS: In the case of Rwanda specifically it was the state actors who were...

WACHIRA: Precisely, and before the genocide, my organization and various other organizations were part of a process that started the moment the former rebel movement crossed the border from Uganda into Rwanda. People are already saying that this is not going

to be good, so a process started that was based on church leaders to begin with and it was spreading to bring in government actors from all the countries in the region not just Rwanda, but Uganda, Burundi, Tanzania, Kenya, it was coming together. But at that point what happened: state actors came, they constructed a new process, took it to Arusha, in Tanzania, arm-twisted the actors, they happily signed an agreement but they had no intention of implementing that agreement. If we had brought in a broader participation of all sorts of actors that have an interest in the conflict in Rwanda and then if state actors, including the United Nations, had acted as a resort of the signs that we are already seeing I think we could have all contributed to the prevention of the genocide in Rwanda.

POPOVIC: If I may add something in connection to the Balkans. A short example is Kosovo because my organization was working in Kosovo before the violence, the real violence, started and I really want to point out that its never too late to act in any pre-conflict situation. Even at that time in 1998 until 98, we organized dialogue seminars and many representatives of different levels, civil society, participated including representatives of ministries. And people wanted to cooperate and they were not afraid to come at that point, it started being dangerous to talk to the other side. They wanted to come, they wanted to cooperate, they wanted to try to organize some meaningful events but as George is putting out, we were simply, we were prevented by political representatives at the time.

WACHIRA: I was going to say we have a...method of peace making that actually peace agreements that we are seeing all over the world are being made on the terms of the same people that made the war in the first place. We have to begin turning things around where we're recognized, voices of peace and invite them to the negotiating tables and these are likely to be civil society organizations, the women, the youth, and so on. And if we don't do that we continue to invite warlords to share power...

JENKINS: All they're going to do is make war and not peace.

WACHIRA: Yes, precisely.

JENKINS: Samuel do you...I'm interested in the techniques that you use for breaking the ice between people who would probably rather not talk to each other. I've noticed at the recent conferences of civil society that there were workshops on things like the Arts and what have you...and again it might make people think that people sing "Kumbaya", but what techniques do you have to use when you talk about the arts? I mean do you- does it help to

have a short play or theatrical piece? I saw a workshop on the use of cinema. I mean, what are these doing as part of this conflict prevention business?

RIZK: Well, people ordinarily think of conflict resolution organizations as those who invite people to dialogue, to basically sit at the table and do all kinds of things. But when you have young people what you want to do is to turn this dialogue into what is called diapraxis. Actually having something, building it together, working on it together so that the practice of dialogue is not just about talking to each other but doing things together that six months from now or one year from now, people can come back and say, 'I built this, we worked on this together', and you get it not only in you brain and your communication but often into your hands. And that I think works for a lot of people and that's why when people go to training seminars on conflict resolution or conflict prevention, it's not only about the two sides coming to the table but its about doing things together and it's about all of these techniques using stories, people interacting with each other, firsthand and it's not all about serious stuff but often it's about fun stuff and using the arts and music and other things.

JENKINS: We'll be right to say, in a way, you are asking people to fantasize to dream a little. If I had my way this is what things would look like. Is that what you are doing? I mean...

RIZK: No, it's about people thinking creatively of doing things together because often what we can do together is not only about the context of me being a Muslim or a Christian but it's about being Egyptian for example. It's about the culture...

JENKINS: Or about being young and unemployed, for example.

RIZK: Or young and unemployed but it's about...

JENKINS: ...something that crosses the differences...

RIZK: ...something that crosses the differences and something that people in conflict resolution training settings, those who have been trained in the settings, are able to do, to bring out the creativity in people and to show them things and ways they have not thought about because they were so involved in the conflict for the past years.

JENKINS: Do you- Is it the feeling of the three of you that the fundamental thing that underlies an awful lot of the drive to conflict is economic?

POPOVIC: Yes.

JENKINS: I mean is it, is that the cynical line...is that the basic thing in all of these conflicts that a lot of people hanging around without jobs, with too much time on their

hands, without money so they are frustrated and angry and that is the raw material from which a conflict is built? Is that always the case?

RIZK: Much of it, yes, but not alone.

POPOVIC: It's not the only culprit.

WACHIRA: Yes, it's very difficult to generalize but it's always a mix of various things.

JENKINS: We don't have much time left. So I'll tell you, I'll explain why I asked that because the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, recently called for a new....what he calls a "New Security Consensus" built from the grassroots up to respond to threats whenever and wherever they appear on the horizon. And I'm just wondering, it seems to me that his constant messages, we have to focus more on development, lift people out of poverty and we will have more security, stability. You're saying it's not just that?

WACHIRA: Yes, but I'm largely persuaded that we cannot address the whole question of sustainable peace without also addressing the question of development and people's livelihood quality of the life of the people. I believe that the more desperate people are, the more hopeless people are, the more reckless they become in terms of how they deal with each other and how they also treat themselves. If you have nothing to lose really it doesn't matter, in fact people have said it, dictators in Africa have said, if I don't kill them by the bullet, they will die of hunger anyway. So we have to pay attention to that question of development and how it links to sustaining peace. You see politics becomes a place where we compete for the little that is available, and therefore if I become the leader it's in my interest that I stay there and bring as many of my relatives because the cake is small and I have the power to control it. The more I shut out the more people want me out and so they are fighting continuously.

JENKINS: Kofi Annan, I think, would have loved that, to hear you say that because that goes right to his message. Unfortunately that's all the time we have.

Thank you all very much for being us on this special 60th anniversary edition of **World Chronicle** dedicated to the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict. Our guests have been George Wachira, of the Nairobi Peace Initiative – Africa...Tatiana Popovic, of the Nansen Dialogue Network...and Samuel Rizk, of the Arab Partnership for Conflict Prevention. I'm Tony Jenkins inviting you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

ANNOUNCER: Electronic transcripts of this programme may be obtained free of charge by contacting World Chronicle at the address on your screen:

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