



Fragile Contexts & People-Centred Preventive Actions

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Abstract

Human tragedies continue to repeat themselves in the same hotspots of the planet. The inadequacy of all remedial policies is in front of our own eyes, but preventive measures are not put in place due to multiple interests and causes. However, a shift to prevention is required if we want to avoid further intensification of destructive phenomena such as violent conflicts, forced migration, poverty, diseases and environmental degradation. It is very clear that the only way to prevent further intensification of extreme man-made and natural disasters is to ensure stable, peaceful productive environments for people in their own lands. That requires a global conception and capacity for action beyond anything done so far. There are many new threats on the horizon: climate change, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, etc. all of which have implications for human societies. We are entering uncharted waters and the international system is very fragmented and reactive. Countering fragility means primarily providing people with tools and means for a dignified life. A problem-focused and context specific approach is required at all times. Ultimately, solutions that are not truly shared by the local communities are not likely to be taken up and succeed. A people-centred approach is based on enhanced awareness of the impact of potential risks and benefits for the beneficiaries and individuals of a given community, from a cultural, gender and socio-economic standpoint. There is a dire need for an understanding of needs and aspirations that provides a clear pathway to empower those who are at risk of being left behind.

Some 1.5 billion people live in countries that experience situations of fragility and armed violence, and another 200 million people are affected by the slow or sudden onset of disasters. Conflict and catastrophic events are triggered by a variety of factors and can impact differently on societies, but in one way or another they all undermine peoples' livelihoods. Left unattended, these events inevitably lead to increased poverty, inequality and social unrest.

The 2018 *States Fragility Report* of OECD*, released in November 2018, points to the fact that without decisive global action, more than 80% of the world's poorest will be living in fragile situations and unsecure environments by 2030.

Fragility, as we all know, is not just a signature concept for academics, but it is the unequivocal expression of a constant threat to human beings. Threats not just represent the number of violent conflicts on the rise and the fact that an average of 80,000 people attempt to flee their poverty and violence-stricken homes and communities each day. The

* See OECD (2018), *States of Fragility 2018*, OECD, Paris

menace to peace and stability is represented by multiple crises that gravitate upon the most vulnerable people and exacerbate situations that are already intractable with global spill over and consequences.

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From a people-centred perspective, fragility could be seen as a bundle of inextricably linked causes and consequences that hamper normal life expectations, personal freedom and dignity. All those “things” that should be handled with care as if they were about to explode in a physical reaction or, more simply, as if they were delicate goods for consignment, labelled or not, as fragile. What requires particular care and special handling are the possible chain reactions among fragility factors, causes and effects: For instance, an epidemic outburst, migratory patterns, local corruption, infrastructure deficits, extreme violence, and so on. All these patterns could be found in many societies, even ones that are considered most stable and secure.

In fragile settings, we are often confronted with extreme destitution and people are not just interested in growth and development. Poverty is due to the lack of income and resources, exploitation, mismanagement and the absence of adequate planning to support sustainable livelihoods. Its manifestations include hunger and malnutrition, limited access to education and other basic services, social discrimination and exclusion as well as the lack of participation in decision-making. Economic growth should be inclusive to provide sustainable interventions and promote equality. However, impacts of multiple calamities during the global socioeconomic crisis are compounding the threats faced by people living in poverty around the world.

1. People Taking Ownership for Peace

Countering fragility means primarily providing people with tools and means for leading a dignified life. The international community, made of a multiplicity of local actors and transnational interests, is considering how to make an impact on fragile contexts averting conflicts, natural and human-induced disasters, increased poverty and the alienation of large chunks of society.

However, two fundamental mistakes often mislead us in our efforts to comprehend the evolution of many political, economic, societal, environmental and security-related crises: One being the oversimplification of the analysis itself that sometimes relies only on predetermined theories of change (causes and effects) with variables that are hardly accounted for; the second being the underestimation of the human element and its complex nature that

cannot be explored and explained merely in terms of parameters such as wealth, economic growth or ideological affiliation.

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In terms of the diagnostics, we should look at context-specific entry points and the long-term evolution of crises. *One-size does not fit all* is the general principle to be applied. No matter how much research has been conducted on the origin and underlying causes of conflict, we cannot expect to import and export experiences and lessons learned from completely different contexts.

Negotiators and peacemakers should increasingly concentrate on the positive side of the story. Even in the darkest pictures of the most intractable conflict, there is a dim light somewhere. I have personally witnessed many episodes of daily survival and coping strategies followed by the most resilient women, children and men in times of armed conflicts, natural disasters and the days that follow: Those dim lights I saw at night through the skeletons of shelled buildings during the conflict in Yugoslavia and the courage and dignity of those who repaired their shuttered huts and reopened a central-African village market just confirm how resourceful humans can be. Building human resilience rather than proposing a foreign-led humanitarian intervention or a conflict prevention measure gone astray is certainly a more constructive way of inducing peace. People taking ownership for peace processes and for preserving their local origins from where everything begins, are decisive factors in any success story. Boundaries can expand and more actors should be included into the fold as we dig into the crisis and try to exert a positive influence for its resolution.

I came to realize that it is always important to acknowledge endogenous peace processes at local, national and regional levels: Impartial problem solvers should aim to focus on these processes. It is not unusual that an ongoing positive discourse between two rival communities on the ground can potentially help overcome difficulties encountered by stalled formal peace processes and negotiations.

At all times in fragile settings, accompanying and seconding initiatives that are locally based, peace promoters and international negotiators have a role in setting the scene, preparing the ground and opening access for all potential stakeholders in the formal or informal negotiation process. A problem-focused and context-specific approach is required for analysis and further preparation. Who is credible on the ground? Who has capacities? These are the questions we should ask ourselves to overcome the silos approach in overcrowded and dangerously drifting situations.

Overcoming the gap between the analysis and congruent actions is the next step. If we do not know how to move forward or design the right theory of change, we should not superimpose a ready-made solution. In many cases, peace mapping might be required to flesh

out what is the potential contribution of different actors, what works and what does not work. For sure, to appreciate changes in the making, a global and locally shared contextual analysis is required in addition to polycentric action.

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In the context of rising geopolitical rivalry, multilevel prevention and inter-communal dialogue are required, it is essential for the local dimension to have primacy and neighbourhood agreements are relevant. Due to the fragmentation of local and international actors, a complementarity of actions is required. Also, the relevance of inclusive preventive mechanisms, such as those that involve women and youth organizations through spontaneous networks based on local interest and conditions, is to be acknowledged. Undoubtedly, there are unutilized human resources and capacities, but nobody has a complete inventory of them all; nor do we know how to use these capacities. There are a lot of actors out there and it is impossible to coordinate all actions and positive efforts. Ultimately, solutions that are not truly endorsed by the local communities are not likely to be taken up and therefore, are not likely to succeed.

A people-centred approach is based on enhanced awareness of the impact of potential risks and benefits for the beneficiaries and individuals of a given community, from a cultural, gender and socio-economic standpoint. There is a dire need for an understanding of needs and aspirations that provides a clear pathway to empower those who are at risk of being left behind.

2. Anticipation and Prevention

This approach also helps to understand what kind of preventive actions could be put in place. To avert protracted crises and human suffering, prevention is needed even if in certain cases it looks as if deescalating tensions were impossible and events were uncontrollable. In all circumstances, inclusive dialogue and participation, combined with sustainable socio-economic development opportunities, are part of the equation to address, with preventive action, the resurgence of conflicts.

More efforts are required now to manage risks and to anticipate change. The world is in turmoil. The consequences of unconscious human action are overwhelming. Norms are cast aside with rampant impunity. State and non-state actors do not comply with international obligations. There are many new threats on the horizon: climate change, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, etc., and all of them have implications for human societies. We are entering uncharted waters and the international system is very fragmented and reactive.

Futurologists and social scientists ask themselves where we are heading and if it is possible to act pre-emptively and correct the trajectory of dangerous spirals, that would inevitably trap populations at risk. The answer is unwritten as the future is. We know that

there is a future but, paraphrasing a successful marketing campaign of a luxury brand—*Do we know what we are going to do with all that future?* The transformation in the making requires us to place emphasis on and imagine a future that should not be delinked from individual aspirations and freedom of choice. *And now, what are you going to do?* This is a question from a cabdriver to the passenger that has just missed an important appointment or interview due to traffic jam. It is also the question for political leaders and scientists who wish to define a pragmatic course of action through a maze of non-linear events. We are supposed to find a solution but we are incapable of addressing the real causes of the malaise.

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Considering the escalating human and economic cost of conflicts and the complexity and challenges encountered in conflict-affected and fragile settings, the UN and its Member States are now shifting the focus from response to prevention as a crucial aspect for preserving stability. This shift should be implemented in addressing the root causes of conflict rather than applying quick fix solutions and focusing on responding to crises alone. When dealing with crisis prevention we cannot limit ourselves to just food and lifesaving assistance. We need to build lives for tomorrow as well.

The Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and its development goals intend ensuring survival on our planet, embracing the three dimensions of sustainability: economic, social and environmental. Moreover, the 2030 Agenda states that sustainable development cannot be realized without peace and security. The issue of sustaining peace is interlinked with sustainable development in a continuum that embraces peacebuilding–humanitarian–development and human rights action. In parallel, the sustaining peace resolutions*, a milestone for the United Nations and member states, promote the adoption of an approach that prevents conflict from breaking into violence. It was recognized in the resolutions that sustaining peace should be broadly understood as a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society, and the needs of all segments of the population should be taken into account. This comes with the recognition that efforts to sustain peace are necessary not only when a conflict breaks out but long beforehand, through the prevention of conflict and by addressing its root causes.

While humanitarian assistance budgets and the toll of disaster consequences and political failure have been constantly increasing, we should shift to prevention measures. Indeed, the international system now in place has two intergovernmental mechanisms (sustaining peace and Sustainable Development Goals) that combinedly represent a paradigm shift. The answer to conflicts and violence is or would be through a chain of actions influenced by sustainable development investments that would allow fragile societies to become more resilient.

* UN General Assembly Resolution 262 and Security Council Resolution 2282 (2016)

This is quite a change from decades of *post-facto* humanitarian assistance, traditional peacekeeping and humanitarian interventions that have certainly saved lives but have not preserved livelihoods while scrapping the surface of the problem in the midst of intractable crises and violent conflicts.

Certainly, a new posture and a cultural shift are necessary to support promising community-level engagements along with commitments being reaffirmed by governments and public institutions. Prevention at the local level and crisis risk management needs to be incorporated in all public and private activity, aiming to avoid the accumulation of new risks in all prospective activities. A corrective risk management is one that seeks to reduce existing risk, supporting the resilience of individuals and societies in the face of “residual risk”. In this sense resilience is built before, during and after disasters or conflicts, and focuses on the ability to overcome crises rather than preventing them entirely.

In future, humanitarian, development and peacebuilding activities will have to be more “risk informed” and sustainable. This will require a fundamental change from planning and programming “risk-insensitive” political priorities towards establishing a world-wide practice of long-term strategic planning integrated with sound crisis risk analysis and vulnerability assessments.

Early and later prevention is needed at all stages. Working with people, local communities and governments allows us to facilitate compromise and to exert peer pressure against violence and conflict, deconstructing the enemy picture, defusing the creation of new enemies and demystifying who the enemy is and who is not. Often, perceptions become reality and working on those perceptions, without dispensing judgements, is a key factor to gain mutual confidence and trust.

A culture of prevention and resilience, through inter-communal dialogue, could bring about the necessary change for mutual learning, understanding and peace.

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