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Preventing pluralism breakdown: Lessons from African peace processes

Editor's Note: Intra-state conflict is the ultimate expression of state failure. Divisions, often blamed on ethnic or religious differences, spiral into violent upheaval. But most societies are diverse in some way. Why are some able to live peaceably with diversity while others fail? In December 2012, Vasu Gounden, the founder and Executive Director of the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) sat down with Global Centre for Pluralism to discuss what conflict mediation processes in Africa and elsewhere can teach us about the conditions of pluralism breakdown.



How does human development contribute to peaceful societies?

Key to those three factors – economic development, rule of law and then human security – would be human development. At the center of all of that is human development. Why? Because human development, education, the holistic development of the human being allows a person to participate meaningfully in an economy, in a nation's day-to-day life, and meet their own aspirations. If you look at Maslow's hierarchy, once you start achieving your basic needs you obviously go to other levels, finally reaching what you call self-actualization. Coming into Toronto and looking at Canada's level of development, it's clear that the majority of your population have the ability to self-actualize, but if you go to Darfur in South Sudan, there is no talk about self-actualization. It's about basic survival. So, what we need to do is to develop the human being, develop the nation in a way that that human being can make a meaningful contribution to society, and then develop that self-

confidence. That will go a long way toward that person then accepting the other person. This is very, very important, I think.

Intrastate conflict is now far more common than interstate wars. Why?

Intrastate conflict is not an African phenomenon. It's a global phenomenon. What we have seen is a shift from wars between states to wars within states and I think that there is a reason for that. The cold war, in effect, put two huge blocks against each other and their proxies against each other. In many ways, it masked internal differences. Once you had that removed, and you unleashed the internal forces and gave people the opportunity to express themselves, that expression found meaning in competition for power. That competition for power, in situations of countries that are highly developed leads to political competition. It's more easily managed in countries like Canada, but when you're dealing with underdevelopment, poverty, and so on, then it's a much sharper conflict and that's the violence that we're seeing in a lot of other countries. Unleashing the internal aspirations of people for power and space without economic development has created fertile ground for the politicization of differences and exploitation of those differences through violence in order to meet individual needs and interest of politicians. That's really what we're grappling with, but it's not an African phenomenon. You've seen the same thing in Eastern Europe, in the Balkans region. We see it in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and now if you look at Greece and you look at Spain, you begin to see the manifestation of similar internal conflicts as these economies breakdown and all of that.

Conflict in Africa is often blamed on ethnicity. Is that the case?

Sure. Ethnicity is not, in and of itself, the root cause of conflict, because I think we all have differences in the world. I asked my staff to look at the ethnic composition of different societies. Kenya has 40 different ethnic groups. Kyrgyzstan has 70 or 80 different ethnic groups, but if you think Africa, you generally think ethnicity. You think Germany, you think Germany. So I asked my staff to go and find out the ethnic makeup of Germany, and they discovered there were 23 ethnic groups in Germany, but the ethnicity in Germany does not lead to conflict because of its economic development and the ability to manage ethnic differences and unite within a larger nation. Ethnicity in Africa, under conditions of poverty, under conditions of economic exploitation and corruption and so on, leads to the politicization of ethnicity and that then is a cause for conflict. That is a question for leadership. With the right leadership, we can make a difference but with selfish leadership, as opposed to selfless leadership, you've got a big problem.

What is colonialism's legacy in Africa?

Well, obviously, colonialism dismantled a lot of traditional governance systems in the continent. You must remember that Europe came through 500 years of war with communities tearing each other apart with principalities and monarchies and all of that being dismantled and then put together again into nation states. In Africa, colonialism interrupted its progression in governance. That does not mean that it would not have gone through conflict. There might also have been principalities and monarchies, which there were, that would have gone to war with each other and eventually, they would have been a dismantling all of that in the creation of nation states. Colonialism interrupted that and created artificial borders with the Berlin Conference. And that has left us with structural deficiencies in the creation of nation states that today allow politicians to exploit those differences, and that's really I think the negative consequences of colonialism. It didn't have all negative consequences. I would say that partly some of the unintended consequence of colonialism would be, for example, we all speak English in one part of the world, and there are lots of people who speak French in the other parts of the world, so it's given a common language to communicate with, but it's done more harm than good on the continent and we're seeing the repercussions of that in a number of countries today and it can take a long time to put all of that together again.

Economic exclusion and conflict are often linked. How do we escape the trap?

That's the big dilemma. It's the poverty trap. What you're seeing, unfortunately, is that we're in a global paradigm that stresses the individual as opposed to the community. So, if you look at the evolution of Canada as a nation, you take the evolution of the Nordic countries as nations, they all evolved at a time when there was a broader social consciousness, a broader sense of community rooted in religious values. Today there is a complete breakdown of values not just in Africa, not just in the Middle East – it's a global phenomenon. It's part of our assertion of the individual, of competition, which drives people to think about the self as opposed to the community. Now, how does that impact on us on the continent? What it does on the continent is it drives this sense of self within leadership also, so not selfless leadership, selfish leadership. Put all of that into a global system with multinational corporations that are only too happy to do business with a centre that is empowered, and that has the ability to manage the concession of resources. What you get then is a very, very vicious cocktail of an unholy relationship between a centre that's empowered together with multinational corporations that exploit the national resources of the country to the detriment of the large majority of people. That's the cycle. If we don't break it, if we don't ensure that the national resource is

redistributed across the board into education, health care, housing, all of the things that sit at Maslow's at the bottom of his hierarchy of basic needs, and slowly start to develop the human being, there will be an unending cycle of conflict.

State building is often proposed as a remedy for conflict. What about nation building?

I think that's the big failure because it is easy to focus on state building. It's a technocratic preoccupation. Create institutions, you bring in a few technocrats and you put them there, and they do an assessment, and they can come up with mechanisms, and they can come up with institutional frameworks, and they can populate that with people, and you can put money in. It's tangible. You can see it. You can feel it. The problem is if you do state building in the absence of nation building. In situations that are coming out of protracted conflict with animosities and so on, if you're unable to harness what's common and build a nation and a new national identity, then that state building will mean nothing in the end. It will just allow competitive forces to occupy that and you'll have continuous conflict. So you have to do state building alongside nation building. You can't do one at the expense of the other.

How does leadership contribute to constitutional reform?

I think it's absolutely important that we look at constitutional reform. Why? Because a constitution of any nation is the base document that regulates the relationship amongst citizens of a nation. So, the constitution of Canada will stipulate how the government relates to its people, how the private sector, the haves and the have-nots relate to each other. There is a whole lot of rights and responsibilities that allow us to live under the rule of law with predictability and that is an essential document for regulating behavior in society and for assuring the rights of individuals. But the paper has to be worth the writing on it, and that means that we have to move beyond the paper to implementing it. That's a question of good leadership. These are things that go together but, as a start, we have to get the right constitutional framework in place.

What are the ingredients for effective conflict management?

Well, I think training people to go to war is not a difficulty. You could sit with someone for an hour and you can train them on the use of a gun. It's not difficult.

You can train them on how to dismantle it and how to assemble it all together again and how to fire it off and, over time, probably they'll perfect how to shoot properly and how to shoot the target and all of that, but basic elements of putting a gun together and firing that off is not a difficult thing. To train someone to negotiate, that's a difficult thing. It requires changing mind sets. It's changing attitudes. It's getting that person to have a complete psychological mental shift. That takes time. So, how do we train people to manage conflict? It's a long process and it's one in which you want to be able to influence that mental shift. The problem is that resorting to violence and resorting to armed struggle and resorting to the military option is actually the easy option and that's why, as human beings, we tend to go for that to resolve our disputes rather than sit down and dialogue. We have to sharpen our instruments at all levels. I was with the Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations two days ago in New York and raised this exact point, that today we have to sharpen our instruments on dialogue. I always use this example. Human capacity is such that we were able to develop the cell phone, a little instrument with amazing power that will allow you, at the touch of a button, to send a message instantaneously across the world. That's the level of sophistication our technology has allowed us to achieve in relation to communication. Yet we don't know how to communicate with each other. That's the paradox that we need to work through. That's where we need to begin to understand that our brain power that we've used to create an instrument of communication should be the same brain power that we use to communicate more effectively.

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