

Guest Essay

CIVIL SOCIETY: FORGING PARTNERSHIPS TO
PREVENT VIOLENT CONFLICT
AND BUILD PEACE

Jody Williams

Over the years, there has been a very successful global lobbying effort carried out by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), which I helped to found and for which I currently serve as Campaign Ambassador. In thinking about our accomplishments, I keep coming back to the fundamental element of effective campaigning: setting the agenda. To frame a new agenda, we must have very clear messages about where we are going in order to campaign effectively to get there. If we really want the world to move away from reacting to conflict and instead move toward effectively preventing it, then we must work consistently and collectively to change the global mindset about what constitutes real global security. In order to prevent armed conflict we must not only work to demilitarize our planet, we must also work to demilitarize hearts and minds. Changing the way people think about peace and security is fundamental to achieving our goals. The role of civil society organizations in bringing about those changes is pivotal, as is a bold and broad commitment by governments and international institutions. Each element of this three-way partnership is indispensable.

In his recent book, *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, Chris Hedges, a non-pacifist war correspondent, captures some of the difficulties inherent in changing the collective mindset about violent conflict:

The effectiveness of the myths peddled in war is powerful. We often come to doubt our own perceptions. We

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hide these doubts, like troubled believers, sure that no one else feels them. [...] The myths have determined not only how we should speak but how we should think. The doubts we carry, the scenes we see that do not conform to the myth are hazy, difficult to express, unsettling. [...] We struggle uncomfortably with the jargon and clichés. But we have trouble expressing our discomfort because *the collective shout* [my italics] has made it hard for us to give words to our thoughts. This self-doubt is aided by the monstrosity of war....

As Hedges notes, the myths peddled in war are powerful. But I would contend that the myths peddled *about* war might be even more powerful. Moving beyond *the collective shout* that insists that war is necessary for peace is a huge challenge. Moving beyond *the collective myth* that creating a peaceful world is the fuzzy dream of utopian idealists is also a huge challenge. Yet that is our collective mission. We must plan ways to meet those challenges and raise *our collective awareness* about the rights and responsibilities of civil society in working to move beyond reacting to violence and toward actively setting the agenda to prevent it.

The ICBL is an important example of how NGOs captured the public conscience and galvanized government action leading to the 1997 Ottawa Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction, commonly known as the Mine Ban Treaty. Furthermore, the ban movement we campaigned and lobbied to create resulted in a successful model of the three-way partnership between civil society, international institutions, and governments. This partnership offered a concrete example of how the global community can work together to resolve common problems. Another example of such cooperative efforts resulted in the successful establishment of the International Criminal Court. Both exemplify the important role that civil society can—and must—play in helping set a new international agenda in our increasingly interconnected world.

These collective efforts also helped further the awareness that

global security is not advanced by increasing military budgets and the number of weapons being developed, produced, and traded in an already over-weaponized world. Arms proliferation will inevitably fuel more violent conflict. Instead, global security ultimately rests upon the fundamental linchpin of human security. More than just the absence of violence, human security defines true global security, as measured in terms of economic development, access to education, availability of health care, and preservation of human rights. Deficiencies and inequities in these measures are the root causes of violent conflict.

To effectively promote this new framework, NGOs must find and use every opportunity to make the general public understand that human security is improved when we work together to meet the most basic needs of the earth's majority and when we work collectively to free women, men, and children from fear and to free them from want. By providing people with hope and a stake in their own future, the underlying causes of conflict can be diminished. We can then increase opportunities to move away from reacting to violent conflict and toward its prevention. We will move toward developing a sustainable peace.

In fact, one of the key efforts to promote this concept evolved out of the successes of the ICBL. Officially launched in Norway in 1999, the Human Security Network brings together the foreign ministries of a regionally diverse group of countries to discuss questions pertaining to human security. The Network envisions a more humane world where every individual is guaranteed freedom from fear and freedom from want. Such a world mirrors Secretary-General Kofi Annan's observation that security, development, and human rights are interlinked, mutually dependent elements of real security. If all elements are not advanced simultaneously, then ultimately none will succeed.

Yet, even though we are increasingly exposed to the words 'human security,' the concept—at least in my experience—does not yet resonate for the general public. Civil society must actively promote the concept of human security as the appropriate framework to help prevent conflict. People everywhere must begin to

understand that by advancing human security we are also advancing global security. However, in order to effectively campaign and lobby to prevent violence and build peace in such a context, it is not enough to merely recognize the term and understand its meaning. We cannot just talk amongst ourselves. When reaching out to the broader public, we must—wherever appropriate and wherever possible—identify our individual work as part of a larger human security agenda.

We must recognize that much of the work we do is work that enhances our collective security. Protecting and promoting human rights is work that enhances human security. Advancing sustainable development enhances human security. Banning or limiting the flow of weapons enhances human security. Meaningfully involving women in all aspects of conflict prevention, peace building, and decision-making processes enhances human security. Addressing poverty through debt reduction, fair trade, and better aid, coupled with promoting good governance and tackling corruption, also enhances human security. Yet too often, opportunities are lost to make these connections. Too often we are the ones who limit ourselves and our overall effectiveness when we choose not to make those connections.

Every time we disconnect the struggle for human rights and peace from the struggle for human security in our work or when speaking to the general public, we undercut our collective efforts to promote a broader understanding and acceptance of the human security agenda as the framework to better prevent conflict. For instance, when we call upon the G-8 nations to improve poverty reduction, should we not be putting those calls into a broader human security framework? Should we not also be recognizing that five of these nations are responsible for at least 80 percent of all weapons traded in the world—which fuel conflict, disrupt sustainable development, and contribute to poverty? Offering increased aid on the one hand while offering weapons with the other can only undercut attempts to promote sustainable development and prevent conflict in the poorest nations of the world. By willfully ignoring these obvious contradictions to make outreach

easier or more palatable, we lessen our own long-term ability to effectively promote a new agenda of sustainable peace.

At the same time, when we do work for the effective control of arms, we lessen our own impact if we do not contextualize our efforts as part of a broader human security framework. Even many NGO members of the ICBL—much lauded as the engine that resulted in the new model of partnership that helped crystallize government thinking about human security—have missed opportunities to reinforce that model and to advance the human security agenda. Instead, we have focused on maintaining our own momentum to reach the goal of a world free of landmines.

Finally, we must debunk common perceptions of violence. We cannot allow people to dismiss violence with the commonly heard explanation that it is simply “human nature” to be violent. Violence is a choice—whether it is the choice of a man to beat the woman he supposedly loves, or the choice of one nation to invade another in the name of “freedom,” or the choice of terrorists of any stripe to attack civilian targets to make a political statement. Violence is a choice.

We must campaign effectively to stop the glorification of war and the acceptance of violence as a means to resolve conflict. We need to promote a different vision of bravery, one that is identified with Aung San Suu Kyi, a woman who has spent too many of the last fifteen years under arrest and who, with each new incarceration, becomes an even more amazing role model for attaining freedom and democracy through nonviolent means. One tiny woman, standing up to militarism and violence with non-violent methods in a struggle for freedom and democracy. Now that is bravery.

We must campaign for human security as a viable alternative to militarism and violence and war. If we really believe that violence is a choice, we can and must set an agenda that promotes the making of non-violent choices to resolve conflict. We must debunk *the collective myth* that building peace is a fuzzy dream of utopian idealists. Working for peace is no utopia—it is hard work each and every day. Civil society organizations such as the

ICBL will continue to do our share to build a strong global partnership, in order to set a new human security agenda to better be able to prevent violent conflict and create a world where *all* truly value peace.

All people, whether they work with civil society organizations, governments, or international institutions, must better understand and accept that in this globalized world many actors can and do impact the response to a given problem or conflict. Therefore, addressing issues of global concern must be as inclusive as possible. Effective multilateralism, dialogue, and conflict resolution must meaningfully involve civil society and its respective organizations. But meaningful participation of women and men representing civil society cannot be seen as mere lip service, nor can it involve coercion or cooptation of civil society organizations to disempower civil society.

I understand that, for some, working with civil society can seem very threatening. The ICBL experienced this kind of reaction even after developing a successful partnership between civil society, government and international institutions. However, working without civil society in today's small world is no longer possible. I would steal a line from the disability rights movement and say: "Nothing about us, without us." Ultimately, issues that affect civil society cannot be resolved without our meaningful participation. Nothing about civil society without civil society. We can and must work together.

Civil society's commitment to meaningful involvement in resolving today's problems will not diminish. We are here to stay. Real partnerships between government, civil society, and international organizations can work to non-violently enhance human security for global security, and thus benefit us all. By working together, we can move beyond merely reacting to conflict and instead toward preventing it and building a sustainable peace.