

AMERICAS

There is a need to establish new and effective tools to prevent conflicts, create early-warning systems, and strengthen the abilities of civil societies to prevent and respond to crises that affect Latin America and the Caribbean. These were the findings from the conference, “Building Regional Responsibility to Protect: The Role of Civil Society,” held in Chile on July 29-30th, 2004.

The conference was organized by The Fund for Peace and FLACSO-Chile and held at the FLACSO seat in Santiago, Chile. It gathered more than forty participants from a wide range of civil society organizations and academic institutions, as well as representatives of the armed forces and governments from throughout the region. Participants came from fifteen countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, Haiti, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, and Uruguay.

The Definition of Security

Debate focused around the necessity to seek a more inclusive concept of security that actively incorporates civil society in the Americas into the peacebuilding process. Participants recommended that this concept contain at least two elements.

First, national and regional visions of security should represent the diverse interests and priorities of the region. The Americas, it was noted, comprises four distinct areas; North, Central, the Andean region, and the Southern Cone. The Caribbean subregion, nearby and with cultural, political and economic links to the Americas, was discussed as well. All too often, participants observed, the

interests and internal problems of one state set the agenda for the entire subregion when each state has its own particular security needs. It was agreed that internal wars, such as the conflict in Colombia, spill over borders and cause wider insecurity for neighboring states. However, there remains a tendency in the international community to view the Colombian conflict as the sole source of instability in the region. Bolivia, it was mentioned, is also a state that is close to collapse. Internal instability in Venezuela and Peru were also cited as posing particular threats to the region that are often not taken seriously enough by the international community because of the greater attention paid to Colombia. Some participants noted that the strong preference on the part of the United States for military solutions to the Colombian conflict has contributed to the perception in Latin America that the US favors solving conflict in the region through military means.

Participants stressed that globalization has generated processes of differentiation rather than homogenization throughout the region, which becomes clear when examining the topic of regional security. In this respect, the nature of conflicts that affect security in the Americas differs according to the subregion. While Andean countries have problems stemming from uneven socioeconomic development and ongoing intrastate crises, Central America exhibits problems related to a lack of economic growth, persistent poverty, continuous border conflicts and an increase in crime. MERCOSUR¹ member countries, for their part, have problems related to internal security as well as issues that are transnational in nature (mainly trafficking in small arms and light weapons) and disputes resulting from unresolved territorial and

boundary issues. At the same time, even within the subregions, it is evident that each country has different security priorities.

Second, progress needs to be made in the ability of civil society to translate its concerns into concrete policy recommendations. Participants stated that far too often the topic of security and human rights is debated in academic settings but rarely translated into the policymaking process. Additionally, the nexus between human security, human rights, and state security is an area in which civil society could contribute strongly to policies aimed at prevention and reconstruction. It was noted that exclusion and social marginalization are particular problems that civil society works on in many Latin American states. Although they are factors that lead to insecurity, these are rarely considered in the context of state and regional security.

Furthermore, the group emphasized that it is important that the armed forces not be used for issues that are developmental in nature, avoiding the “securitization” of the development agenda. The “militarization” or “securitization” of social, economic and political problems – by deploying the armed forces – could aggravate existing conditions of unrest rather than mitigating them. Particularly in states already confronting weak and failing civilian institutions and a steadily deteriorating security environment, participants strongly warned against the use of the military as it could potentially lead to human rights abuses and undermine the rule of law. Participants feared a return to military dictatorships, which faced the region throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Clearly defining the concepts of human security, human rights and state security, and the links that exist among them, is fundamental and should not be overlooked in the search for a broader definition of security.

Understanding the Nature and Timing of Conflicts

Participants felt that conflicts in the Americas stem from three primary sources: a lack of socioeconomic and institutional development within states; latent and longstanding interstate conflict; and the emergence of transnational problems (drugs

and weapons trafficking and organized crime) that have a great impact on both domestic and regional security. In order to begin to address conflicts in Latin America, the interrelationship among these three causes of conflict must be understood, as they inspire conflicts within states, between states and across national boundaries.

Participants stressed the need to highlight the diverse nature of conflicts in Latin America and the Caribbean so that creating a successful plan for prevention and resolution would be based on the specific characteristics of each conflict. There were four types of conflicts defined: urban violence, political violence, transnational conflicts and interstate crises.

Urban violence, as detailed by a participant from Brazil, is not necessarily characterized by the existence of political motivations or the presence of insurgent groups. Rather, urban violence mainly stems from armed criminal groups comprised of young men, aged 15-29 years, coming from poor neighborhoods in large cities and with low levels of access to education and the formal job market. These criminal gangs are mainly engaged in the illegal sale of drugs and firearms and pose a significant threat to the stability of several of Latin America’s large urban centers. Violence, characterized as gang warfare over territory, has reached extremely high levels in the past several years and claimed the lives of significant numbers of young boys and men as well as innocent civilians trapped in the battle zones. An absence of effective state institutions and a lack of basic public services have also contributed to the escalation of violence.

Urban violence is most prevalent in Brazil and El Salvador, countries that are not experiencing “formal” wars, although the ineffective or incomplete demobilization of young guerrilla fighters in Colombia has also led to similar problems in the cities of Cali and Medellin. In many cases, participants noted, state attempts to stem the violence by employing strong police and military force had only exacerbated the situation rather than ameliorating it. The biggest victims of urban violence, one participant stated, are the families of

the boys killed by the police who then lose the only source of income they have. Addressing the root causes of urban violence, such as the provision of basic amenities by the state, would be far more effective at ending the crisis than trying to arrest or kill the perpetrators.

The threat of political violence continues to be a problem in many countries in the region. Participants pointed out that Latin America, in particular, has a long history of political violence with numerous internal conflicts of varying intensity spurred by guerrilla movements, state and rebel-sponsored terrorism, military coups d'état and revolutionary movements. The roots of political violence are found in the socio-economic structures of many countries in the region characterized by massive inequalities in income and wealth distribution as well as territorial conflicts. Despite reform campaigns undertaken throughout the past several decades, especially in Central America and the Andean region, chronic poverty and inequality place states at high risk for backsliding into chaos or collapse, participants warned.

Although Colombia and Haiti stand out as the most persistent examples of unresolved political violence in the Americas, other countries continue to linger on the brink. Venezuela, it was observed, remains politically and economically divided and has experienced several episodes of violence that easily could grow into a wide scale internal conflict.

Indigenous movements in the Andes, most notably in Bolivia and Peru, have grown in strength over the past several years and have become increasingly radical and violent in their opposition tactics. One participant warned that the discovery of vast gas reserves and the continuation of US-backed coca eradication campaigns have pushed Bolivia to edge of state crisis, with upheavals in 2003 and 2005 over the president's tenure as an example of the fragility of the state. In Peru, also having experienced violent protests that led to fall of the President Fujimoro in 2000, both endemic corruption and severe poverty have contributed to the rising levels of armed robberies, murders and gang-related warfare.

If the widening social and economic gaps in these countries are not taken seriously and steps taken to immediately address the issues, participants warned of a return to the brutal political violence of the past.

Both transnational conflicts and interstate crises were defined as largely stemming from unresolved crises in the region as well as part of the legacy of conflicts of the past. Conflicts in the Americas, it was noted, do not normally manifest themselves in widescale outbreaks of violence, and they are addressed as they "flare up" rather than being effectively resolved. Inter-American and international mediation efforts have focused on calming and containing crises rather than resolving them and, as a result, conflicts have simmered, often for decades. The wide availability of weapons resulting from continuing conflicts and partial or ineffective disarmament and demobilization processes in post-conflict states pose a continued threat of transnational and interstate conflicts becoming quickly militarized.

The Responsibility to Protect

Conference participants agreed that civilian protection is the shared responsibility of states and civil society actors in the region and includes the specific aspects of prevention, reaction and rebuilding. A need to focus on the role of civil society in preventing conflict was underscored. Most participants believed that military intervention should be the last resort in the region. However, it was agreed that it is important to advance the debate on when a conflict necessitated an intervention and who should intervene, both topics of critical relevance.

The Americas, with the exception of the ongoing crises in Haiti and Colombia, has seen few conflicts that have resulted in humanitarian emergencies on a scale comparable to those that consumed Southeastern Europe in the 1990s or that continue to rage in Africa. The wars waged in Central America over the past several decades were characterized by low-intensity armed conflicts and insurgency movements that, over time, resulted in civilian casualties and internal displacement crises.

Nevertheless, because these conflicts at times were amenable to temporary political solutions and did not garner the international outrage at genocidal or ethnic cleansing campaigns that resulted in outside military interventions in Europe and Africa, participants had a difficult time conceptualizing something on par with the NATO interventions in the Balkans occurring in Latin America.

Since crises in the Americas have often been political in nature and not the deliberate and sustained targeting of religious or ethnic minorities by the state, most participants felt that a military intervention would only exacerbate political tensions and awaken or embolden minority secessionist aspirations. One participant pointed out that the potential for a humanitarian disaster in some of the unstable states of the Central American and Andean regions is also held in check by the existence of their more powerful neighbors to the north and south. While many states continue to experience political upheaval and guerrilla insurgencies, a massive humanitarian disaster that would result in high numbers of civilian casualties and a refugee crises could, it was felt, quickly be mitigated by either the United States in the north or one of the more powerful Southern Cone countries of Brazil, Argentina or Chile. The problem, however, as mentioned earlier, is that long-simmering conflicts are often addressed in the short term and states can remain in a semi-permanent state of “near collapse.” Haiti, it was stated, is often viewed as an anomaly in the Americas but, as it has twice been the subject of military interventions to stop humanitarian catastrophes, it must be more closely examined.

The fact that, in little over a decade, Haiti has experienced two political crises that have necessitated outside military interventions should not be seen as an anomaly but as example of a wider regional inability to confront the deeper factors leading to state collapse. More importantly, participants argued, Haiti presents the tragic example of how poverty and a lack of development can fuel political unrest that can rapidly spiral into the level of violence that claims innocent civilian casualties. Despite two military interventions and subsequent UN administrations, Haiti has remained

the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. The international community and the region in general have not responded to the root causes of Haiti’s collapse and only reacted to its symptoms.

A participant from Haiti questioned whether the intervention was motivated by a desire to protect civilians from grave human rights abuses or by a larger concern on the part of the United States of a massive flood of refugees in the southern state of Florida. This question, combined with the failure of the first UN intervention to address the severe developmental gap between Haiti and the rest of the countries in the hemisphere, has given rise to the sentiment in Haiti that the international community is only committed to short-term stability arrangements meant to end the immediate violence. Through committed and sustained international efforts to help Haiti become a truly democratic and developed nation the region as a whole can truly demonstrate the principles of *The Responsibility to Protect*.

Multilateral Responses

As it stands, the region depends on ad hoc mechanisms which seek to contain conflicts rather than prevent them. This dimension makes it very difficult to build subregional or hemispheric solutions to national problems that threaten regional security. The Colombia conflict was given as an example of a national crisis that, if it worsens, would have negative regional consequences. It was noted, however, that the region has experienced successful multilateral attempts to end internal conflict, as in the case of the Arias Peace Plan, the diplomatic efforts by the heads of Central and South America countries to bring peace to Central America, which began in 1987.

The Organization of American States (OAS) simply has not played a major role in the protection of civilians in the region. To be fair, the fault lies not in the OAS itself but, as in instances in which the UN and other regional bodies have failed to act, in the lack of will on the part of its member states to impart any real authority or capacity to the organization to intervene. As a result, the OAS does not possess the institutional authority to

intervene to stop widespread human rights abuses or massive loss of life. There is also no “coercive” mechanism within the OAS Charter and a lack of consensus on the part of the OAS members about when confronting serious threats to constitutional democracy. Hence, the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which was adopted in 2001, has remained only at the level of the expression of principles. It can be said that while there have been some steps towards greater respect for human rights and the protection of civilians in the region, especially at the level of rhetoric, many Latin American countries still hold fervently to the principles of respect for national sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs. In addition, given that very few countries are exempt from civil unrest or internal conflict of some sort, pushing for action to be taken in a neighboring country is seen as opening up oneself for similar interventions.

The OAS has demonstrated a significant inability to act, not only when confronted with humanitarian emergencies like Haiti, but also when countries in the region flagrantly abuse the rule of law, suspend democratic processes, and perpetuate human rights abuses against their citizens. Although it successfully mediated the political crisis in Peru in 2000-2001, the OAS has continued to exhibit shortcomings as a regional body to mitigate and manage crises. The obstacles to action are familiar. The OAS relies on member consensus before action and, like the UN, relies on its member states to provide the financial and military resources for undertaking an intervention. Beyond being hampered by the need for consensus and member state contributions, the OAS has failed to move beyond rhetoric in regard to activating its “Cooperative Security” principle outlined in Santiago in 1991. Although the OAS Democratic Charter outlines the need for an “inter-American system” of collective security based on the “defense of democratic systems of governance,” it contains no actual mechanisms to mandate an intervention in the instance of a crisis.

When the Bush administration, at the OAS General Assembly in May 2005, called for the creation of a mechanism to respond to threats to democratic governance in the region and for an increased role

for the region’s civil society organizations, two dynamics combined to see the proposal rejected. First, countries of the region have grown increasingly skeptical of US interference in the region’s, to the point of calling the proposal. Second, the proposal struck at the heart of the organization’s inability to obtain from its members a commitment to any type of binding mechanism that could infringe on state sovereignty. As a result, the proposal was significantly weakened to the point that the final declaration called only for the incoming OAS secretary general to produce *a report* evaluating the organization’s effectiveness at protecting democracy. The idea of an expanded role for civil society was completely rejected by the General Assembly and failed to reach the final declaration.

In addition, the OAS has suffered from a lack of credibility on the part of many of its member states because many of them feel that too large a role has been played by the United States. The location of the OAS headquarters in Washington and the perceived instances of the U.S. “bullying” the OAS to concede to actions other member states deemed unacceptable has only underscored this belief. Additionally, within the organization itself, there are sharp disagreements over the role of the organization as a protector and enforcer of democracy and human rights. Key nations, like Mexico, refuse to consider the adoption of coercive mechanisms to enforce the right of the body to intervene in intra-state conflicts. Despite acknowledgement on the part of many of its members that the hemisphere is facing new and emerging threats that fuel internal conflict and lead to state collapse, it has been unable, in mandating action, to play a greater role in regional security and the protection of civilians.

Finally, participants noted that there exists a mutual relationship of distrust between the United States and many countries in the region which has impeded attempts to create a more formal Inter-American security system to solve regional conflicts. From the perspective of countries from Central America and the Southern Cone, the politics of hemispheric security are driven by the interests of countries in North America and the Andean region, most notably

the war in Colombia and U.S. tensions with Venezuela, and not necessarily inclusive of their broader regional concerns.

The Role of Civil Society

In general, regional topics are not on the agenda of civil society organizations. Civil society actors rarely work on issues such as region-wide peace and security, the development of a multilateral agenda, the lack of democracy within regional and subregional bodies. Most civil society organizations are engaged at the academic level or focus on topics more closely related to peacebuilding rather than crisis response and humanitarian intervention. It was noted that civil society has failed to produce concrete solutions to the region's security problems that go beyond the ideological debate. These matters are still seen as falling within the domain of state responsibility.

Participants stated that the process of globalization has caused some civil society organizations to focus solely on the local level and how to respond to development-related issues without fully incorporating a regional security perspective into their work. Moreover, as each country in Latin America and the Caribbean emerges from the conflicts and political crises of the past, the nature of civil society and the issues being addressed differ widely. As such, it is difficult to form a network of organizations to address issues on a regional basis.

As most civil society organizations rely on outside funding and donor support, it presents a constant challenge to remain both financially sustainable and autonomous as civil society actors often find their work dictated by and reliant upon outside agendas. This variable also makes it problematic to formulate organizational agendas and long-term strategies. Participants also noted a general lack of accountability and transparency among civil society organizations in the region.

Further, civil society in the Americas has not always been successful in establishing channels of communication with local and national governments and at the multilateral level, making networking across national boundaries difficult. It was noted

that the nature of governance in Latin America differs vastly in each subregion and relationships between civil society organizations and governments are highly reflective of this dynamic. In many cases, such as Chile and Costa Rica, the lines of communication that allow for greater civil society input into government policy occur mainly through academic institutions that have formed effective links to governments. In Colombia and the Dominican Republic, civil society organizations work with the government but they are focused on communicating the grievances of particular marginalized groups operating within the state. In other states, such as Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela, civil society has at times achieved action but has also been co-opted by the government in various neo-populist movements. In other Caribbean and Central American countries emerging from internal conflict in the past two decades, civil society is only beginning to emerge as a legitimate actor in fragile democracies. In Haiti and Cuba, civil society has had limited space to operate and needs to be fostered.

In underscoring these challenges, participants to the conference highlighted that the diverse nature of social and democratic development that hinders inter-state civil society cooperation is magnified when attempting to engage regional bodies. Finding a single platform to lobby regionally is difficult, if not impossible, in the Americas as subregional threats vary so widely. The OAS, while nominally representative of all states in the Americas, is not confronted by the same regional threats to security but rather threats that predominate by subregion. The conflict in Colombia and the developmental disparities faced by civil society in Central America and the Andean region are virtually non-existent in North America and steadily improving in South America. Similarly, the state collapse of Haiti and its continued alarming poverty and developmental crises are not acutely replicated anywhere else in the region. Thus, threats to regional security in the Americas are viewed more on a subregional basis and fall within the domain of subregional bodies, like the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and MERCOSUR, but still vary widely enough to hinder the formation of an active civil society movement based specifically on threats leading to a greater

humanitarian emergency. This has led to the trend of civil society organizations focusing much more deeply on a national level, often divorced from both a regional and subregional identity.

It was noted, however, that the trend to focus on a local level has united civil society on several platforms related to peacebuilding and development issues that can be utilized as active lines of communication and foster a greater sense of regional cooperation. In most of Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, civil society organizations are engaged in campaigns concerning human rights, women's movements, indigenous rights campaigns and other movements based on the negative effects of globalization. Moreover, as noted earlier, the growing trend in urban violence and the violence resulting from urban overpopulation afflicts many countries in the region. There are many successful experiences in terms of the impact of civil society organizations on these topics, especially on issues related to supporting human rights and the environment, and participants stressed the need for civil society to share experiences, particularly positive ones.

Recommendations:

Creating Instruments

Creating an analytical matrix of the conflicts occurring in Latin America and the Caribbean in an attempt to raise the awareness level of civil society

By promoting greater awareness of the different types of conflicts, civil society organizations can participate in the prevention, resolution and rebuilding process. It was proposed that the matrix should include strategies and policy options for the prevention of possible conflicts; responses to present conflicts (Colombia); post-conflict situations (Haiti), and the identification of new threats (urban violence).

Designing a virtual network for conflict prevention and resolution at the regional level

The aim of the network would be to obtain information rapidly and to create a common system for better coordination of civil society efforts.

Creating new sources of information that provide data on particular issues, for example, on small arms and drug trafficking

Impact and dissemination strategies

Strengthening networks through the Internet

Create a registry of civil society organizations that are working on security and conflict prevention issues at the hemispheric level. Participants favored the use of the Internet as a tool for establishing a web site. This site would facilitate the exchange of experiences and best practices among civil society actors.

Setting the agenda for action at the national level

Define action strategies to be applied when engaging government officials and parliamentarians.

Generating new spaces of influence at the multilateral level

Promote the incorporation of new societal groups into existing spaces of influence, both formal and informal, in hemispheric organizations. For example, the OAS allows non-governmental organizations to participate in General Assembly meetings although this channel has not yet been fully utilized by civil society organizations.

Creating a dialogue with the media

Establish communication with national and regional media in order to bring issues of peacebuilding to the greater public.

Training

Good practices

Promote the sharing of successful experiences by civil society organizations through seminars and professional NGO exchanges.

Peacekeeping operations and training

Foster a dialogue between the armed forces and civil society through national and regional seminars focusing on each group's experiences during peacekeeping operations.

Support the inclusion of civil society organizations working on security issues in the courses held at regional peacekeeping training centers.

Courses for journalists

Provide training in conflict management issues to journalists in order to promote a discussion on new visions and approaches to these matters within the region.

ENDNOTES

¹ Mercosur membership comprises Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela are associate members.