



# THE ROLE OF UN VOLUNTEERS IN THE FUTURE OF PEACEKEEPING

Remarks on the occasion of the International  
Day of UN Peacekeepers

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“The pursuit of peace and progress cannot end in a few years in either victory or defeat. The pursuit of peace and progress, with its trials and its errors, its successes and its setbacks, can never be relaxed and never abandoned.” —Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961), second Secretary-General of the United Nations

Not a day goes by without our world being confronted with the suffering of millions of people because of the ravage of armed conflict and war. All of us are negatively affected by the onset of war, even when fortunate enough to live in a peaceful place. Conflict and war bring pain to all living creatures on Planet Earth, for conflict and war remind us of the fact that we are not reaching the potential that we were endowed with from the moment we were born.

It has been assumed that if we can understand the complexity of war and violence, we will be able to foster and sustain peace. This aim can be found in the articulation of one very specific sentence in the UN Charter determining that the UN aims “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” Around the world, the United Nations Blue Helmets are the concrete expression of this UN Charter paragraph.

We are beginning to understand not only what factors lead to war, but also what it is that leads to peace. The structures, attitudes, and institutions underpinning peace are slowly being brought to the surface, rendering insight on what are the motives that drive people to work in support of peace, not of war. Still, on a global scale, peace remains largely an elusive goal, often negatively portrayed as merely the absence of violence. The work carried out in the context of UN Volunteers’ assignments however clearly demonstrates that there is much, much more to peace than merely the absence of war. This remark places emphasis on the unique nature of the engagement in support of UN Volunteers in the context of peacebuilding. An engagement which is characterized by an approach firmly build on solidarity, a will to initiate positive change from within and a clear and concrete commitment to work in conjunction with the peoples of a region.

The peaceful resolution of conflict, and maintenance of international peace and security are amongst the cardinal purpose for which the United Nations was established.<sup>1</sup> Peacebuilding is at the heart of the UN organization's work and continues to be a pressing priority for all UN Member States. To contribute to the realization of this objective, the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme mobilizes (in the year 2016) a total of 6,700 United Nations Volunteers. Out of this total, more than 3,400 UN Volunteers are assigned to a total of twelve UN Peacekeeping Missions, and several UN Missions driven by a political mandate. From within these contexts, UN Volunteers contribute to peace-making, peace building, peacekeeping, preventive diplomacy, conflict prevention and resolution, with and from the local community. It is from within these local communities where UN Volunteers assigned to UN Peacekeeping Missions exchange experiences with their local and international counterparts, strengthening capacities in the field. The exchange of high-level knowledge and experience-sharing among UN Volunteers, UN Peacekeepers and national, regional and local populations greatly enhances the building of a more stable, more peaceful environment. In more than one way, and in multiple directions, always based on mutual outreach with the peoples living in a region.

In 2015, with the launch of its report, the policies and recommendations formulated by the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on uniting strengths for peace, politics, partnership and people became the leading document to build UN Peacekeeping (HIPPO-Report, 2015).<sup>2</sup> The document entails far-reaching implications for the UNV peace work—within the UN Peacekeeping Missions. For example, the HIPPO Report determines that “United Nations Volunteers, who already play a crucial role, could be more effectively enlisted in strengthening engagement with national actors and local communities across mission mandates and assisting in national capacity development.” In addition, the HIPPO Report mentions “With respect to engaging communities, the Panel recommends that (...) the Secretariat work closely with the United Nations Volunteers programme to further integrate United Nations Volunteers

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<sup>1</sup> *United Nations, The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the Advisory Group of Experts on the Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture*, UN Doc. A/69/968-S/2015/490, June 30, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on uniting our strengths for peace: politics, partnership and people [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/446](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/446), June 2015. Challenge of sustaining peace—Report of the Advisory Group of Experts on the Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/69/968](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/69/968) (AGE Report), June 2015.

into the community liaison efforts of missions, including through their greater use across occupational groups, and to further develop local capacities.”

Following the HIPPO-Report, the UN Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI) is drafting a paper on community-level engagement. Once released in Spring/Summer 2017, the paper potentially presents UN Volunteers with new directions as to a specific niche within the broader realm of Rule of Law and Security in which to take on a role. Around the globe, UN Volunteers stand ready to do so.

Over the past two decades, and in response criticism, the UN has taken several steps toward reforming its UN peacekeeping operations. The most notable documents in this respect is the Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (Brahimi Report, 2000). The report formed the first formal step to reform the UN peacekeeping environment. The Brahimi Report noted that the UN Member States had not yet implemented a standing UN army or standing UN police force. Thus, UN peace operations had been based on ad hoc coalitions of willing states rather than on structured, concerted efforts. The report also addressed the resulting dysfunctions of UN peace and security operations. The Brahimi Report led the United Nations to focus more on information collection, the gathering of intelligence that eventually led to a better understanding of concepts of decision and support.

From the analysis initiated by the Brahimi Report—and further developed in the AGE Report (2015) and the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations HIPPO report (2015)—it was concluded that no one-size-fits-all peace operation and that the civilian component of UN peacekeeping missions should be formalized and enlarged. Thus, present-day UN peace keeping work on the premise that the success of every mission depends on an active political process, with the commitment of all stakeholders, particularly governments, and the involvement of all sectors of the populations. In this definition, sustaining peace is underpinned by an infrastructure composed of institutions, norms, attitudes, and capacities spanning different sectors and levels of social organization. Sustaining peace is also conceived as a necessarily endogenous process that requires strong and inclusive participation of local communities. Committing to sustaining peace through active outreach with communities means that the starting point of the process of building peace should be taken differently—ushering in a paradigm shift in our understanding of peace.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing those seeking to understand sustaining peace is to define the concrete actions that will contribute to its effective implementation.<sup>3</sup> The conceptual basis for sustaining peace can be traced back to Johan Galtung's work on what Galtung calls "positive peace".<sup>4</sup> Per Galtung, positive peace requires building and strengthening of the factors that foster peace. Among these factors are those that enable "everyday peace", such as solidarity and compassion between different (ethnic) groups, and systemic factors, such as equitable distribution of resources, well-functioning institutions, tolerance for diversity, respect for the rights of others, security from physical harm, and access to food and clean drinking water. Sustaining peace also seeks to place greater emphasis on detecting and strengthening what is already working, not only what is in disrepair and needs fixing. Even societies under stress have capacities that need to be nurtured.<sup>5</sup>

**"Peace equals ability to handle conflict, with empathy, nonviolence, and creativity..." —Johan Galtung (1930)**

The emphasis on identifying context-specific capacities as a starting point for sustaining peace makes it primarily an endogenous process.<sup>6</sup> Seen from this perspective, sustaining peace is not a timebound intervention defined by the funding cycles of donors or mandates of peace operations; rather, it is an ongoing effort best undertaken through national policies and the involvement of all levels of civil society. Peace can be most effectively sustained when it is conceived as a public good for which the public and the state share responsibility. Thus, as with other public goods, it is the shared responsibility of all stakeholders, and indeed all citizens, to contribute to it. Peace cuts across different levels of human organization, from the interpersonal to the societal, rendering sustaining peace a highly collaborative task that requires strong leadership and deep, long-term involvement.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Coleman: *The Missing Piece in Sustainable Peace*, Earth Institute, November 6, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Johan Vincent Galtung (1930) is a Norwegian sociologist and mathematician, and principal founder of the discipline of peace and conflict studies. Johan Galtung: *Positive and Negative Peace*, August 30, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Mac Ginty, *Everyday Peace: Bottom-Up and Local Agency in Conflict-Affected Societies*, Security Dialogue 45, no. 6, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul Lederach: *Conflict Transformation*, Beyond Intractability, October 2003.



It is concluded that sustaining peace constitutes a paradigm shift in how we think about peace and how we address conflict. As a process and a goal, building sustainable peace is not the burden of outsiders, nor is it a challenge that communities must conquer on their own. Even under the worst of circumstances, external interventions should endeavour to build on what people know and what they have. For nearly half a century, it is here where thousands of UN Volunteers have engaged with hundreds of societies, successfully. UN Volunteers have contributed to the developed of national infrastructures for peace, offering valuable knowledge for this and it is within this nexus that the contributions made by UN Volunteers—those women and men working in the community, from the community, with the community—are referred to as crucial, and indispensable regarding the reaching of lasting peace results.

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