

Reimagining CIVIL PATHS TO PEACE in the Commonwealth



Amjad Saleem looks at the complexities around violent behaviour and its causes, and calls for civil society to be better at risk management and pursuing conflict without violence.

A cursory glance at the 2015 Global Peace Index (GPI, www.visionofhumanity.org) makes for very interesting reading. Out of the top 20 most peaceful nations, only three out of the 53 members of the Commonwealth make the cut – New Zealand, Canada and Australia – although not all the smaller member states are included in the index. Out of the 50 most peaceful nations in the world, a further six members are added – Singapore, Mauritius, Malaysia, Botswana, United Kingdom and Namibia. What the GPI shows is that the world has become generally less peaceful since 2008, a situation largely attributable to the rise of conflicts within states, the rise of terrorism and increasing levels of criminality. The number of displaced people and refugees is the highest since the end of the Second World War. Although the long-term trend in peacefulness is positive (there has been a marked and persistent downturn in levels of violence and conflict since the end of the Second World War), the number and intensity of high-profile conflicts and atrocities in the short term have increased.

While the first half of the 20th century was a major period of inter-state warfare and wars of decolonisation, the second half gave way to an era of predominantly civil conflicts. A little over 20 per cent of the world's population live in countries under the threat of large-scale, organised violence, according to the World Bank's 2011 *World Development Report*. Experiences over the last decade in many part of the world illustrate the challenges that the changing nature of armed conflict poses for peace as the landscape and nature of conflict is changing. Challenges to the established order in different places around the world are arising linked to diverse causes – political change,

regional and national autonomy, urbanisation, climate change, faith and cultural identity, or securing the basic conditions of life. Many conflicts (including within the Commonwealth region) may be chaotic, multi-sided, not necessarily openly political and, in many cases, a confusing amalgam of crime, politics and business. Crime, violence and the wider social and political instability thus produced will threaten human security, raising the prospects for new forms of conflict. While each conflict will be different from the others there are three common factors:

- Conflicts will contest how, by whom and for what ends power is held and used.
- Whether they escalate will depend on whether systemic vulnerabilities have eroded society's capacity to manage conflicts peacefully.
- If they escalate, ordinary people will suffer.

The new forms of violent conflict within societies cannot be packed away out of sight – they would not remain there. This must be of concern for Commonwealth member states for the future.

Causes for conflict

Underlying some of the causes for current conflicts are some cross-cutting characteristics, including the rise of violent non-state actors and the prevalence of civil wars; deep socio-political and ethno-religious cleavages; huge levels of mistrust and intolerance; constantly changing alliances, loyalties and relationships; changing frontlines and territorial control; destruction of social infrastructures and services; and links to natural resources. In many cases where



Faith Leaders in northern Sri Lanka engaging in dialogue with communities on peace and reconciliation

Credit: A Saleem 2015

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there has been a cessation of violence and hostilities, peace agreements and the accompanying international apparatus to support their implementation have suppressed the violence but not addressed the causes of conflict. Accordingly, the risk of a re-eruption remains. One of the best indicators of where there is risk of future violent conflict is simply identifying where there was violent conflict before.

While politics, faith, identity and rights are often the foreground factors for any conflict (i.e. these are the issues that people fight for and against), it is important to pay

attention to the long-term systemic issues that increase conflict. In a nutshell, identified in International Alert's *Strategic Perspective 2015-2019*, there are three strategic issues that will affect long-term conflict dynamics, all of which have direct relevance and impact to Commonwealth nations. These are, first, people, cities and resources; second, inequality; and third, climate change and nature.

People, cities and resources

The world's population passed the one billion mark in 1810, doubled in the next hundred years, and by 2010 was about seven billion. The projection for 2030 is nine billion. But the issue here is not pure numbers – it is resources. When the global total reached one billion, just 3 per cent, 30 million people, lived in cities. Today the world is 50 per cent urbanised – that is, 3.5 billion people live in cities. Projections put the percentage in 2030 at between 60 and 70 per cent, over 5 billion.

Urbanisation is by no means bad in itself. Cities have many problems, but their emergence and growth is strongly and directly associated with growing literacy, a deepening culture, increased cooperation and social mobilisation for progress on political rights. However, growing urbanisation is also associated with increased output: economically, urban concentration is much more efficiently productive than rural decentralisation, which means increased consumption of natural resources. In addition, growing urbanisation provides a different set of issues with regard to conflict. Because of its changing face, much of today's violence takes place in middle income countries that are not the traditional stomping ground

of the peacebuilding sector (Mexico and Jamaica, for example). *The Global Status Report on Violence Prevention 2014* (WHO/UNDP/UNODC) shows that within low and middle income countries, the highest estimated rates of homicide occur in the Americas (28.5 per 100,000), followed by Africa (10.9 per 100,000). The lowest estimated rate of homicide is in the low and middle income countries of the Western Pacific (2.1 per 100,000).

For many Commonwealth countries experiencing rapid development and urbanisation, areas of concern include the prospect of 'shadow' economies, the connections between the violence driven by politics with the relentless drive for money and the status that comes through criminal gang violence leading to violent conflict. With weak state institutions, the violence becomes cyclical and relentless as criminal violence is traditionally met with the violence of law enforcement – violence on violence.

Inequality

Extreme poverty is conventionally defined as living on less than US\$1.25 a day (in 2005 prices). According to the World Bank, 1.22 billion people were living below that line in 2010, down from 1.9 billion in 1990 – a major improvement, especially since the world's total population had increased in the meantime. But 2.6 billion people live on less than US\$2 a day and a total of 3.5 billion – half the world's population – on less than US\$3 a day. Thus, while natural resources are consumed in abundance, half the world has very little. The problem is not just economic inequality but the unequal opportunities and access to what should be common goods, such as education, health services, clean water and safety, which flow from the economic facts. Further, the problem is not just inequality in all its dimensions, but the fact that today's information and communications technologies make relative wealth, status and prestige highly visible to those at or near the bottom of the pile. This is where the seeds of resentment lie that create fertile grounds for conflict entrepreneurs of all kinds. Countries where inequality is sharpest are often countries where inequality both fuels and is fuelled by the root and branch corruption of the governing system. Inequality is not a natural accident; it is a system of wealth and privilege that has been constructed, and is actively defended. For rapidly developing countries within the Commonwealth this is a trap that needs to be avoided.

Climate change and nature

For the past 20 years there has been a consensus that global policy on climate change should aim to keep the increase in average global temperature to less than 2°C above pre-industrial temperatures. Today, the 2°C world seems a fading dream and even if the world economy is decarbonised at an impossible rate, the consequences of previous greenhouse gas emissions will keep unfolding for decades to come. The consequent changes in our natural environment will have social, economic and, in many places, political effects.

Meanwhile the interaction of the changing climate with other features of the socio-economic and political landscape offers new challenges to human security. Climate change is bringing more slow-onset pressures such as droughts, shifts in the timing of the monsoon in parts of

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south and south-east Asia, and hotter summers and wetter winters in temperate zones. There will also probably be an increasing frequency and severity of sudden shocks – the extreme weather events such as hurricanes, typhoons and cyclones. These will put pressure on four strategic systems that are essential for the way we live:

- Water supply
- Food security
- Energy supply, and
- Natural resource supply chains.

These systems are also under pressure from other human-impelled changes in nature, such as the loss of biodiversity and the effects of different kinds of pollution. These changes combine to create many unknowns in the natural environment; in the long term, economic progress is pushing up against the planetary boundaries of sustainability. It is not that life will become impossible, although some habitats will become functionally uninhabitable. Rather, these four strategic systems will become more vulnerable, more costly and more complex with conflict as one of the consequences.

In particular, for the Commonwealth group of nations which comprises of a majority of small island states and agriculture-based economies, climate change is the stark reality. As the threat increases to the very existence of nations and communities, so too do the issues about conflict and community relations.

Civil Paths to Peace

The analysis outlined above suggests that human progress is at risk of being undermined by a combination of many changes coming at once – some willed and some forced upon society – and the consequent stress. For example, this would be the case where the impact of climate change on water supply and food interacts with the aftermath of violent conflict, poor governance and huge inequality. Often in this kind of scenario, the stress is articulated in terms of politics, faith and identity.

It is hard to manage stressful change without adequate institutions and systems for doing so, which are lacking or deficient in many countries including in the Commonwealth. The combined impact of demographic, economic and natural changes, moreover, will occur at every level, from the village and the street to the global system. Deficiencies in resilience are likewise to be found at every level. Local, national and international

arrangements and institutions that may have functioned reasonably well to date now face challenges they were not designed nor equipped to face. Furthermore, this is happening against the background of political change and instability in countries and globally.

However, at the same time as these economic, social and natural problems mount, there is increasing pressure in many places against exactly those organisations and agencies that want to describe the problems and do something about them. The space for civil society is getting narrower in many countries, especially where the problems are sharpest. This inhibits open debate, which in turn constricts the flow of new ideas and creativity for generating new solutions.

Understanding how the different elements of risk interact with each other is fundamental to conflict analysis, and to understanding what can be done to build peace in any particular context. The capacity to respond to challenges is necessary but not enough; and relying on crisis response is truly inadequate. It is essential to meet emerging problems upstream.

A seminal piece of work commissioned by the Commonwealth in 2007 actually addressed this dilemma, suggesting ways of building mutual communication and understanding among communities in the Commonwealth. The report, *Civil Paths to Peace* (CPP) by the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding, suggested a framework for all stakeholders (government, media, civil society, business and so on) to understand the complexities around violent behaviour and its causes, without prejudging what these might be.

CPP addresses the narrowing space for civil society and asks for its mobilisation to confront violence as well as engage in the process of democracy. It encourages the removal of gross economic inequalities, social humiliations and political disenfranchisement which can contribute to generating confrontation and hostility. In effect, it calls for an integrated approach to dealing with all economic, social and cultural issues that are related to conflict. It recognises that cultural and social factors as well as features of political economy are all important in understanding violence. CPP puts forward the premise that there is a need for greater respect and understanding of diversity, to counter disquiet, disaffection and violence:

“If the cultivation of respect and understanding is both important in itself and consequential in reducing violence and terrorism in the world, the link between the two lies in understanding that cultivated violence is generated

through fomenting disrespect and fostering confrontational misunderstandings.” (*Civil Paths to Peace*, 2007).

The concept of developing respect and understanding is further cemented by Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen’s premise in his book *Identity and Violence*, that the key to good citizenship and social cohesion is the encouragement and retention of multiple identities. People have several enriching identities: nationality, gender, age and parental background, religious or professional affiliation. They identify with different ethnic groups and races, towns or villages they call home, sometimes football teams; they speak different languages, which they hope their children will retain, and love different parts of their countries. It is the recognition of this plurality and the searching for commonalities within this pluralism that will lead to greater respect and ultimately understanding and acceptance. Thus these new solutions will have to challenge people to accept diversity and create equal opportunities for diverse communities, ethnicities, traditions, cultures and faiths. The new solutions will also have to take into account the existence of multiple identities which add a richness and variety to diversity and pluralism as part of a common wealth that needs to be celebrated in the global civil society and integrated into life as a positive force for development.

In *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Kwame Anthony Appiah writes eloquently of the urgent need for “ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become”.

Addressing this, the Commission argues for much more dialogue and discussion on the richness of human identities and the counterproductive nature of placing people in rigidly separated identity boxes, linked with religion or community.

Facing up to challenges

Civil Paths to Peace very much speaks to the concept of upstream peacebuilding as envisaged by International Alert in their *Strategic Perspective for 2015-2019*, referred to and quoted here. In this age of growing long-term risk, the international community as a whole needs to be better at risk management. In order to be able to meet problems upstream, there need to be strong advocates for creative dialogue, and diplomacy that understands the context and addresses civic empowerment.

Peace in societies is best defined as when people can pursue conflicts without violence and harm to themselves or others. In other words, it is not conflict that is the problem, but violence. Indeed, conflict is often a necessary condition for making social progress, and the ability to manage conflicts without violence is an important skill by which we do so.

Peace is recognisable not exclusively or even primarily by evidence that people are resolving conflicts and differences peacefully, but also by the presence of a number of ‘peace factors’. These are the conditions that encourage people to handle conflicts peacefully and prevent serious problems from emerging, as well as offering many other shared goods. These factors draw on the idea of human security and ‘positive peace’ (a peace that is more than just the absence of violence). They express both what needs to be aimed for and how one assesses whether a society is indeed moving in a peaceful direction. The peace factors concentrate on:

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- Whether power is organised and leadership is used for the common good, and what degree of voice and accountability ordinary citizens have
- How safe and secure people are, i.e. the degree of human security
- Whether ordinary citizens have access to a reasonable degree of prosperity
- Whether ordinary citizens have access to a fair system of justice based on laws that meet the common interest, and
- How well and fairly people's well-being is looked after.

Running through these five peace factors are values of equity, fairness, inclusion and respect for human dignity, and with that the importance of human relationships that are fulfilling and functional for peace. These lead to the view that conflicts can and should be resolved peacefully as much as is humanly possible, i.e. that every effort should be bent to that end. Where and when that proves impossible, every effort must be devoted to returning to a situation in which violence does not threaten every person's safety and well-being, and in which conflicts can be handled by dialogue, discussion, the law and settlement.

These peace factors are all about the long term. While political leaders' decisions are required to make these unfold positively, to sustain or protect them, they do not come about at the flick of a leader's switch. Similarly, while peace is most likely and strongest when many individuals gear their actions toward peacebuilding, the effects of activism are not necessarily either quick or linear. Rather, change is indirect, incremental and cumulatively transformative.

Revisiting the principles

At the 2007 Commonwealth People's Forum in Kampala, civil society leaders called for "the creation of an enabling environment to foster: unity in diversity, where there would be respectful and meaningful dialogue and collaboration between people with different identities and values; and practical grassroots action and community linking partnerships to build peace, prosperity and well-being for all Commonwealth citizens". This was very

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much in keeping with the *Civil Paths to Peace* mandate for an engaged process towards respect and understanding.

The 2015 CHOGM process offers an opportunity to revisit these principles and this concept. Given the fact that a large part of the Commonwealth falls within the lower end of the GPI spectrum, it is perhaps important to reaffirm its own commitments towards working for peace with dignity. This, of course, cannot be done in isolation but needs to be done in partnerships.

The story of Tau Sen, the master musician at the court of the Mogul Emperor Akbar, is an example of partnerships. He had some fifteen musical instruments in the Emperor's chamber, which he had tuned to one frequency. Upon playing just one instrument's musical note, the other fourteen started to resonate, to the astonishment and delight of the audience. Ideally this story can serve well as a metaphor for how communities can work in harmony to achieve an enlightened result.

This paper provides a framework for exploring the future of conflict based on the Commonwealth's Civil Paths to Peace work undertaken in 2007, and the work of International Alert. It draws substantially on, and quotes whole passages from, International Alert's Strategic Perspective 2015-19, authored by Dan Smith, and Civil Paths to Peace, published by the Commonwealth Secretariat in 2007. ■

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International Alert is one of the world's leading peacebuilding organisations, with nearly 30 years of experience laying the foundations for peace. It works with local people around the world to help them build peace, advising governments, organisations and companies on how to support peace. It focuses on issues that influence peace, including governance, economics, gender relations, social development, climate change, and the role of businesses and international organisations in high-risk places. In Sri Lanka, International Alert has been working closely with the Royal Commonwealth Society on engaging with Sri Lankan diaspora for post-conflict reconciliation.

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