

Notes for a presentation by Roy Culpeper, The North-South Institute

**Threats, Challenges and Change:
New Directions for the United Nations**
Senate Room, Robertson Hall, Carleton University
February 1, 2006

Panel on “*The Need and Mechanisms for Change at the UN*”

I am very glad that the conference takes its title from the report of the Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, entitled “A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility”. My remarks are informed by that report, by the more recent *Human Security Report*, and of course by ongoing research at The North-South Institute.

I believe the High-Level Panel’s report to be one of the most compelling, audacious and indeed visionary, to have emerged from the UN in recent years. (Some UN critics who believe that the UN produces an unending stream of mostly forgettable reports may say “So what?”)

If you don’t think highly of UN reports, another groundbreaking report published recently by a non-UN body deserves considerable attention. I am referring to the first *Human Security Report* of the Human Security Centre at the University of British Columbia, “War and Peace in the 21st Century”. That report documents, with comprehensive data assembled for the first time, the unheralded fact that the global security climate has dramatically improved in the past 12 years. Civil wars, genocides and international crises have declined sharply, *notwithstanding* Rwanda and Srebrenica; while international wars have been in steady decline for a longer period. More wars have stopped than started since 1988. Since WWII the number of battle deaths from conflict has fallen dramatically, from 38,000 in 1950 to 600 in 2002.

The 2005 *Human Security Report* attributes the dramatic improvement in global security to the “veritable explosion of conflict prevention, peacemaking and post-conflict peacebuilding activities from the early 1990s spearheaded by the UN” and organizations (including NGOs) working with the UN. While the report cautions against complacency and recommends further improvements in the UN, it suggests giving the UN considerably more credit than it typically gets for being effective in its core mission of conflict prevention and peacekeeping.

Need for Change—a new, development-centred approach

The High-Level Panel’s report is compelling in its analysis of the *need* for change, by declaring that “security threats” facing the world today are far different than at the creation of the UN after World War II when the principal threat was that of States waging aggressive war. While that threat has certainly not disappeared—some, including the Secretary-General himself, consider the U.S. war in Iraq to contravene the UN Charter—there are many threats facing the world that go far beyond conflicts between States.

These threats include widespread poverty, infectious disease, environmental degradation, violent conflict within States, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and transnational organized crime. The report says that today *collective security* rests on three pillars: these interconnected threats recognize no national boundaries; no State can make itself invulnerable; and it cannot be assumed that any State will be willing or able to protect its own people.

The challenge posed by the report is reaching a consensus about the meaning and responsibilities of collective security today since differences of wealth, power and geography determine perceptions as to the gravest threats—but “without mutual recognition of these threats there can be no collective security”.

The report is audacious when it recommends *prevention* as a first line of defence against all these threats, and particularly when it argues that development is “the indispensable foundation for a collective security system that takes prevention seriously”. Development “helps combat the poverty, infectious disease and environmental degradation that kill millions and threaten human security. It is vital in helping States prevent or reverse the erosion of State capacity, crucial for meeting every class of threat. And it is part of a long-term strategy for preventing civil war and addressing the environments in which terrorism and organized crime flourish”. How does the world enhance collective security? First and foremost by investing heavily in human development.

Mechanisms for Change: a more effective United Nations for the 21st Century

The Panel’s report is highly critical of the UN General Assembly and challenges members to make it perform its main functions better through reconceptualizing and shortening the agenda to focus on contemporary challenges facing the international community, and avoiding debates about minutiae and irrelevant thematic topics.

The report makes a number of recommendations on Security Council Reform, perhaps the trickiest part of the UN reform agenda. There is a session this afternoon on this topic so I will not pursue it further. The report also makes a number of other widely publicized recommendations, including the establishment of a Peacebuilding Commission and reforming the Human Rights Commission.

However, I would like to dwell on the report’s recommendations for the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) which strike me as very sensible but have not had much attention. It calls on the UN, through ECOSOC, to exercise “normative and analytical leadership” so that the interconnected threats and issues of peace, security, and development can be addressed together in a coherent way. No other international body is in a position to do this. It recommends transforming ECOSOC into a “development cooperation forum” with an agenda focused on the Millennium Declaration and Development Goals and the Monterrey Consensus. To that end it urges ECOSOC to strengthen the coherence of the UN and international agencies, including the Bretton Woods institutions and bilateral donors.

I also want to draw on work NSI is doing on sustainable peacebuilding and the “responsibility to protect” which emerged originally in the 2001 report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (established by the Government of Canada). Whether and how to give effect to “R2P” (e.g. in Darfur) is of course at the heart of current international debates, which have become more heated in the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq and Haiti (in which Canada is part of the coalition).

Fundamentally our work suggests, consistent with the analysis of the High-Level Panel’s report, that R2P should be much more broadly framed. It is currently too narrowly conceived; that is advocacy strategies, including those pursued by the Canadian government, tend to focus on developing consensus around the reaction agenda. As a result, R2P has been interpreted by some—particularly officials and civil society organizations in the South—as a legitimizing doctrine for intervention based on narrow Northern agendas. Instead, R2P should address the whole continuum of protection, conflict prevention, crisis intervention, and post-conflict rebuilding. This aligns both with the Panel report and with the interrelated priorities of peace, security and development in Africa and much of the developing world.

Our work (again consistent with the Panel report) also points to the potential and growing importance played by regional bodies such as the African Union and sub regional bodies such as ECOWAS, complementary to the valuable peacebuilding and development work of the UN and other multilateral bodies. Although there are major challenges facing such regional bodies, we recommend that donors should provide assistance to the AU to bolster its conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction capabilities as well as its crisis intervention capacity.

We put considerable emphasis on the need for long-term economic and social development in order to thoroughly resolve conflicts in fragile states. Too often the international community does not “stay the course” after intervening to stabilize conflicts. This means not only restoring the rule of law and establishing good or better governance, but at least as important, ensuring that employment and sustainable livelihoods are created or re-established and that regional, ethnic and other inequities are recognized and addressed. If they are not, there is a high likelihood of a relapse back into violence within a few years.

Last but certainly not least we have paid particular attention to UN reform issues seen through the lens of civil society, both in the South and the North. Over the past three years we have surveyed hundreds of civil society organizations to assess the degree of their engagement with the Millennium Declaration and Development Goals. We have published the results in a series of reports entitled, appropriately, *We the Peoples...*

Our most recent report indicates that CSOs are increasingly active in pressing world leaders to keep the promises made in the Millennium Declaration. However, they are also intent on going beyond the MDGs by attacking the roots of poverty and inequality, the obstacles to universal human rights, health and education, and the dangers to our planet’s environment. They urge world leaders to undertake collective action to build and sustain peace everywhere.

Our 2005 report suggests that when it comes to “UN reform” (sometimes code words for radical downsizing or evisceration) civil society organizations call for mobilizing the necessary resources, human and financial, to *strengthen* the United Nations in order to assure development, social justice, peace and security in our world and in succeeding generations. This is ironic in view of that over the past year the UN has pulled back from CSOs, allowing much more restricted access to the discussions in the run-up to the Millennium Summit Review.

A year ago, when the Liberal government undertook its international policy review, The North-South Institute submitted a brief arguing that equitable and sustainable development is the vital “connecting tissue” between the main strands of foreign policy—diplomacy, defence and commerce. Similarly, if “UN reform” fails to make sufficient headway on equitable and sustainable development, there can be no lasting peace or security. That has been my principal message.
