

**Remarks by Ambassador Elizabeth Cousens, U.S.
Representative to ECOSOC, for the US/Canada/Israel Team,
8th Session of the SDG Open Working Group, on Conflict
Prevention, Post-Conflict Peacebuilding and Promotion of
Durable Peace, Rule of Law and Governance**

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New York, NY

February 7, 2014

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Thank you, Mr. Co-Chair. We are happy to speak on behalf of Canada, Israel, and the United States.

As we reach the conclusion of our stocktaking, we enter a phase of work in which we will need to make tough choices about priorities. We have all underscored the need for a compelling set of goals that are limited in number and have the most enduring impact on people's lives and prospects.

Earlier this week, we spoke of women's equality and empowerment, and equality and inclusion more generally— both foundational to a 21st century agenda to combat poverty and promote sustainable development. Today, we address a set of issues no less central. Durable peace and open, responsive government based on the rule of law are intrinsic goods in themselves but also an essential underpinning of development. They should be prominent among our eventual goals and targets

Let us start with some evidence about peace.

The world has seen tremendous gains against poverty in the last generation, with over 675 million people lifted out of poverty globally. Yet we all know that the track record has been uneven, and countries affected by conflict have been the most trapped by persistent poverty and the most impeded from reaching the Millennium Development Goals. Indeed, by 2015, over 50 percent of the total population living in extreme poverty will live in places affected by conflict and chronic violence – a trend that is expected to intensify with over 80 percent of the persistently poor living in such conditions by 2025.

No one disputes that conflict and violence dramatically undermine development. Countries that experienced major violence between 1981 and 2005 had a 21 point higher poverty rate. Countries affected by severe violence fell behind twice as far in reducing infant

mortality, their populations are three times as likely to be undernourished, and their children three times as likely to be out of school.

The impact of conflict and violence also crosses borders. The toll on regional development prospects is significant: for example, countries have been estimated to lose 0.7 percent of GDP every year for each neighbor in conflict. As we heard yesterday, external stresses like illicit flows, organized crime, and trafficking exacerbate existing challenges and impede progress in otherwise peaceful societies.

This is not surprising: violence and conflict, in addition to physical damage and the toll on human and social capital, create uncertainty about the future and undermine precisely the confidence that is necessary for economic activity and social support.

Moreover, significant violence amounts to development in reverse: the average cost of a civil war is equivalent to over 30 years of GDP growth for a medium-sized developing country, trade levels after major violence take an average of 20 years to recover, and the global economic impact of addressing such violence is estimated at 9.5 trillion US dollars, or approximately 11 percent of the Gross World Product.

Put another way, we can commit to universal access to quality education but it will be meaningless for the 28-plus million children in countries emerging from conflict who, according to UNESCO, are still not in school, or the women and children who make up 80 percent of refugees and internally displaced persons globally. That is too many to leave behind.

That makes the issue of safe and peaceful societies a paramount poverty issue.

Moreover, this is a universal issue –a child born in a community wracked by violence in any of our countries faces corrosive impediments to education, health, and future livelihoods. And we all have work to do: according to UNODC, the United States has a higher homicide rate not only than our two teammates but than half the countries in the United Nations, and cities and communities with higher homicide rates are generally also economically disadvantaged.

Thankfully, there are multiple ways to promote peaceful societies in goals and targets that are aspirational but achievable, measurable, and universally relevant. These include reducing violent deaths and eliminating violence against children; reducing the growth rate of refugees and IDPs; investing in justice institutions that are accessible and independent; building the capacity and accountability of the justice and security sector. We welcome discussion about how best to reflect these issues in our framework going forward.

Let me turn to the equally essential issues of the rule of law and governance, which are fundamental contributors to peace, poverty reduction and sustainable development.

Publics around the world, all our publics, are demanding new seriousness about honest, fair, and responsive governance. In the UN's MyWorld Survey, every region of the world ranked "honest and responsive governance" among people's top 5 priorities, together with health, education, and jobs. That's a powerful demand.

Open, effective, and accountable institutions are crucial to economic vitality in all of our countries. This was a strong message from leaders of the African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, and European Development Bank, World Bank and IMF, in their letter to the Secretary General last year – that governance and institution-building are essential foundations for sustainable development.

We also speak often about "access" – access to food, access to safe drinking water and sanitation, access to education, health, and social protection, and so on. But access will only be made real – for the 10-year old girl Dr. Babatunde described earlier, or for any of our children – by policies and political institutions that promote inclusion, laws that are fair and fairly administered, and institutions that guarantee citizens the basic tools for their own empowerment.

Let me highlight a few ways to give people those tools. There are many ideas to draw on, from many contexts and perspectives, that could inform well-crafted goals and targets:

Inclusion and opportunity can be promoted through free and universal birth registration for all children; increasing the number of women and minorities in decision-making bodies; giving women and minorities equal rights to own and inherit property; or increasing the percentage of land to which women and men have secure tenure. Every year 50 million children start life without a legal identify because their birth is not registered. As a result, these children are often vulnerable to being disappeared or trafficked, condemned to the margins of society, blocked from school, denied healthcare, unable to open a bank account, unable to own property, vote or start a business. That's a solvable problem.

Access to justice and the rule of law can be promoted by increasing the percentage of people with access to effective legal services; strengthening the responsiveness and quality of independent justice institutions, particularly to women and excluded individuals and groups; or curbing illicit flows. The rule of law is not only intrinsically important but economically smart: studies have shown that when countries strengthen the rule of law, they can experience a three-fold increase in GDP.

Effective, responsive and accountable institutions can be promoted through information and transparency about governance, especially in relation to public expenditures; a thriving civil society; and the safe and full participation in public life of all individuals, particularly individuals and groups that have been marginalized such as the chronically poor. Freedom of speech, association, and assembly, is crucial to spur public debate about priorities and delivery of essential services such as education, health care, water and sanitation, and environmental protection. As we have seen in countries ranging from Indonesia to Mexico, from Liberia to the United States, practical innovations like universal publication of government budgets, transparency around natural resource extraction, and freedom of information legislation, or the use of peer review mechanisms like the African Peer Review Mechanism we have just heard about, have given citizens powerful and effective tools to hold their public servants accountable for better performance and also given governments better tools to respond to the needs of their citizens.

None of these are new ideas. The importance of legal empowerment, in particular, was put on the world's radar years ago by a notable Peruvian economist –Hernando de Soto -- who insisted that we not write off the poor but rather given them the tools – like the right to own and inherit property, sign a contract, register a business or open a bank account – to be agents in their own destiny.

All of these are measurable aims.

And all of them would measurably improve the lives especially of the most vulnerable in any of our countries.

Many of our colleagues here, such as Indonesia, Brazil, Liberia, Tanzania, and many others are among the world's pioneers in championing more open government and breakthrough innovations that give expression to some of these ideas – promoting citizen participation, transparency, and an accountable and responsive public sector. We all have much to learn from one another.

Here in the Open Working Group, our task is to forge a set of goals and targets that can make enduring gains against extreme poverty and exclusion, and promote sustainability for future generations. That is why we reaffirmed the centrality of peace, rule of law, and governance at Rio+20 and again last September in the High-level Event on the Millennium Development Goals. That is why we need to give focused attention to these issues as priorities in the next phase of our work.

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