The Transformation of Conflict in Latin America. Towards Peacebuilding from a Regional Perspective: A Project by the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress

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"Peace is a daily, a weekly, a monthly process, gradually changing opinions, slowly eroding old barriers, quietly building new structures."
John Fitzgerald Kennedy

Introduction

Military strategist and theorist Carl von Clausewitz in his book On War (1832) defined war as "an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will."[1] Since Clausewitz's study on the philosophy of war, scholars have continued to explore the evolving nature of 'war' and 'conflict'.[2] Cordell and Wolff define conflict as "a situation in which two or more actors pursue incompatible, yet from their individual perspectives entirely just, goals."[3] Ramsbothan, Woodhouse and Miall specify that *"armed conflict* is a narrower category denoting conflicts where parties on both sides resort to the use of force" and similarly, *"violent conflict, or deadly conflict*, […] also includes one-sided violence such as genocides against unarmed civilians."[4] According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), an "active conflict, both state-based and non-state" is taking place "if there are at least 25 battle-related deaths per calendar year […]."[5] However, despite some reluctance in admitting its limitations, the definition of conflict on the basis of deaths calculated in a given time period does not suffice, particularly considering the thin line that separates direct from indirect fatalities.[6]

Regardless of the debate on its definition, one thing remains clear. Since the end of the Second World War and particularly after the collapse of the bipolar system in 1991, violence and conflict have not been the same. Swift changes taking place at the global level led to new studies and observations on how war and conflict have changed and become disguised in new forms.[7] As Samuel Huntington stated, "change was inevitable; progress was not."[8]

As the Cold War came to an end, the world ceased to be the battleground of the East-West ideological clash, and countries saw a significant decline in inter-state conflicts. Instead, intra-state conflicts increased, sparking mostly from ethnic and cultural divergences. Such has been the case of the war between Sudan and South Sudan, the ethnic-cleansing in Western Darfur, the extermination of Tutsis in Rwanda, and of Muslims in former Yugoslavia. The illusion of peace at the beginning of the 1990s was soon replaced by the outbreak of internal conflicts. Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, war broke out in Sierra Leone, Somalia, Congo, Nepal, Chad, Cambodia, Lebanon, Kosovo, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire. Factors that gave way to conflict

in the twenty-first century diverge significantly from those before and during the Cold War. Peace has not prevailed and it has been challenged by the failure of individual states to offer any viable solution to contrasting cultural identities, growing social inequalities, and vying economic competition.

In line with global changes, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean are facing similar challenges. During the 19th century states in the region were caught in between the scrimmages of European expansionist powers; today attention has shifted from old world powers and traditional warfare towards distinct forms of violence. While disputes over territorial and geopolitical issues do not represent a priority, social, economic, cultural, and environmental matters cause great concern within domestic and international politics. Despite substantial economic progress, inequality has risen and the gap between the rich and the poor has widened. Social and cultural dynamics have created a society integrated across transnational borders, yet divided within individual states. Threats posed by climate change have shed light on concerns over natural resources and the sustainability of the people.

Current issues represent a challenge to the stability of the region. Threats have arisen at the international, domestic, and transnational level, and the ability to contain them has not proven an easy task. Multilateral organizations have done little to adapt to the changes taking place in the region. Economic and political organizations, such as the Organization of American States and the Union of South American Nations, lack adequate strategies for the prevention of conflict, despite their regional focus. At the domestic level, governments have made strong attempts to undertake the necessary reforms. However, traditional top-down approaches often fail to include broader civil participation. As a result, non-institutional actors are exploring alternative routes that may better adapt to the dynamics of the region and offer a new perspective on the practices of conflict prevention and peace building.

In order to better understand the features and purpose of these new approaches, it is necessary to first analyze recent changes and the risks they may carry.

Conflict in Latin America and the Caribbean

Changes in the outbreak of conflict have affected all regions of the
world, including Latin America and the Caribbean. Territorial moti-
ves have been less pivotal, as social, political, and economic factors
have generated new concerns. In Latin America, security challenges,
both military and nonmilitary, stem from interstate, intrastate, and
transnational issues that include: military coups, civil wars, weapons
proliferation, resource conflicts, trade disputes, economic migrations,
and transnational crime among others.[9] Although Latin America has
been relatively peaceful compared to other regions of the world, the
absence of high-scale conflict today does not imply that it will not
appear in the future.[10]

1. Geography and Territory

At the interstate level, geographical factors such as contiguity, un-
defined territorial and maritime borders, and shared water sources
often give rise to dispute. Historically, the majority of quarrels have
sparked from geopolitical divergences. The Paraguayan War and the
Chaco War (between Bolivia and Paraguay) stand out as two of the
most violent conflicts in the region's history. Bolivia and Paraguay are
historically well-known for their landlocked position. Both countries
were eventually allowed access to the sea through official agreements
signed in 1973 (Paraguay) and 1992 (Bolivia), but their geopolitical
features always represented a detrimental factor for their development.
Even countries that do benefit from direct access to the sea have ar-
gued over access through additional ports in neighboring countries.
However, most of these disputes have been resolved through interna-
tional arbitration processes and never led to the outbreak of conflict.
Overall, geopolitical factors do not seem to pose an imminent threat to
peace; however, they should not be overlooked when studying current
relations among states.

2. Politics

Political factors constitute a more relevant source of instability, es-
pecially when recalling the history of military coups and regimes in
Latin America and the Caribbean. Today, almost all countries in the
region have adopted democratic forms of government, however, many

are still considered partial democracies, which according to the State Failure Task Force Report have a seven times greater risk of failing.[11] In addition to institutional fragility, some internal dynamics may represent underlying factors of instability, namely electoral fraud, corruption, social disintegration, and power imbalances. According to the Failed State Index of 2011,Haiti, Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala are all considered to have a high degree of instability.[12] Also, tensions among civilians and the military have not completely disappeared in countries where military regimes were deeply rooted in institutional rule and led to the so-called "guerras sucias". Latin America is an example of how an apparently peaceful environment shadows tensions and strains that could potentially lead to conflict if not reconciled.

3. *Economics and Development*

A third class of risk factors stem from economic development, which has been at the center of debate in the last decades. Jeffrey D. Sachs states that "In Latin America,[…], bitter economic conflict is one of the central phenomena of economic life. […] Economic policymaking in Latin America remains a battleground of conflicting interests of class, sectors, regions, and ethnic groups."[13] Moreover, as stated in the World Bank Policy Research Report, "the key root cause of conflict is the failure of economic development. Countries with low, stagnant, and unequally distributed per capita incomes that have remained dependent on primary commodities for their exports face dangerously high risks of prolonged conflict."[14]

Three measures of economic performance—GDP per capita, economic growth rate, and degree of export dependency—shed light on a country's risk for conflict. Studies have estimated that the lower income per capita, the greater the risk of conflict. As GDP per capita doubles, risk of conflict falls by half.[15] Conversely, other studies show that democracies become more instable than autocracies when GDP per capita does not exceed US$ 1,085. According to World Bank data, two countries in the region show lower levels of GDP per capita, Haiti (US$ 671) and Nicaragua (US$ 1,132), which classifies them as countries at risk.[16] Low income levels cause greater discontent; where institutions fail to offer adequate support, people rebel or turn to illicit means to seek new resources. In such an environment, violence and conflict

are more likely to arise, driven by the impulse to find ways to escape poverty and overthrow ineffective public policies. Similarly, research shows that a one percent increase in a country's economic growth rate reduces the risk of conflict by the same amount.[17]

Lastly, despite the lack of direct relationship with the eruption of conflict, dependency on primary goods also represents a risk. Export-dependent countries, particularly oil-rich countries, have a stronger correlation with conflict than others. When exports represent 30% or more of GDP, risk increases steeply compared to when they are only about 10% of GDP.[18] Moreover, political institutions often overlook the importance of domestic private interest groups, who manage production and exchange, when defining both national and international policies. Any failure of the state to avoid discontent may create deep internal tensions. The same discontent can stem from what Raul Prebisch and Hans Singer defined as the "secular deterioration of the terms of trade." According to their theory, the price of primary goods has increased less than proportionately compared to manufactured goods over the years. Given that most developing countries depend on the production and export of primary materials, the disadvantaged position they hold relative to industrialized countries is detrimental for their development.[19] Tensions may arise within such a context and, in the extreme case, spark violence domestically.

4. Culture and Society

Not far from the economic factors are social and cultural factors. Inequality, social violence, presence of criminal organizations, and ethnic diversity, to name a few, are relevant categories that represent a challenge within contemporary Latin American societies.

As discussed above, lower GDP per capita and economic growth rates increase the chances for conflict. However, these measures do not mirror income distribution among populations. According to the United Nations Development Program, the region of Latin America and the Caribbean has the highest rate of inequality in the world reaching 24%.[20] As social inequality deepens, conflict becomes more likely.[21] Disadvantaged groups and individuals often attempt to overcome economic hindrances by engaging in extra-legal activities that range from burglary and minor criminal acts to arms and drugs trafficking

and violent criminal organizations, which flourish in the absence of efficient prevention and reaction from the state. Recent data and evidence show that social tensions do not disappear in countries where inequality remains stark. Countries such as Belize, Haiti, Colombia, Bolivia, Honduras, Mexico, and Brazil are struggling to find feasible solutions to eradicate disparity and turn towards long-term social and economic development. In these countries, organized crime flourishes as extra-legal groups have created vast networks through which they have been able to establish themselves deeply at all levels of society. Although the ongoing debate has not officially labeled organized crime activity as a war or conflict, violence has increased in two ways. On one hand, criminal organizations fight against the authorities, such as the military and the police; on the other hand, competition among different organizations triggers a new type of battle, one that takes place at the level of civil society. The relationship between inequality and conflict gives way to a vicious circle that is not so easy to break. Once violence sparks from these groups it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid escalation towards conflict.

Finally, migration and ethnic tension constitute additional risk factors. Problems can arise when migrants are either forced back to their country of origin, where they are unable to resettle, or when they cannot integrate within a new location. Migration is also one of the main sources of ethnic diversity. In environments where communities grow increasingly diverse, the risk of cultural clashes increases. However, it is more likely to experience conflict within societies that include at least two prominent ethnic minorities. Multi-ethnic countries that have at least two ethnic groups with substantial weight in society —such as Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, and Peru— the chances for internal conflicts to take place increase.[22]

5. Environment and Resources

The final category of risk derives from climate change and scarce resources. Studies on the topic have become increasingly relevant across all continents, more so in developing countries, where development often depends on favorable environmental conditions. Recent studies suggest that conflict will arise around the availability of drinking water, fertile areas, and natural resources, particularly petroleum and natural gas.[23] From receding glaciers in the southern Cone, to the

risk of droughts, floods, and hurricanes, almost all countries in Latin America and the Caribbean face challenges posed by climate change.[24] While governments are seeking to define new policies and to collaborate on the containment of damage, many states are ignoring the risk associated with migration, which may lead to a considerable number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). As the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has reported, climate change and deriving natural catastrophes will take the displacement of people to a different, more complex degree.[25]

Analyses conducted over climate change and resource scarcity show that the risk for political/ideological or secessionist conflict increases by 3.1% and 8.2% respectively in natural resources-abundant country. Additionally, when the contended resource is petroleum, the chances that a conflict is a fight for secession are 99.5%.[26] Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean are provided with rich natural resources, particularly petroleum. Competition is likely to increase over resources that are abundant and marketable in the global economy. The literature on the subject investigates how such resources have fueled conflict and violence due to the exploitation of their abundance and profitability, or the uneven distribution of generated returns.[27]

Concern around this new set of challenges has rapidly grown within Latin America and the Caribbean. In the integrated global economy, economic, social, cultural, and environmental issues have become deeply intertwined, increasing the risk of conflict outbreak in the region. The development of updated measures to reduce the risks deriving from these changes has encountered several difficulties. If the role of multilateral organizations and domestic governments played a leading role in conflict prevention and conflict resolution in the past, the same approaches might be no longer adequate to face today's challenges.

6. *The International Community and Governments in the Prevention of Conflict and Peace Building*

In general, the most successful means of resolution globally applied has been arbitration with a 43.5% of cases with the intervention of the International Court of Justices (ICJ).[28] In Latin America and the Caribbean, multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations (UN) or the Organization for American States (OAS), have played a

crucial role in mediation processes and have been relatively successful in brokering agreements between conflicting countries. However, there have been cases in which these organizations failed to bring conflict to an end or were unable to intervene at all. These include the Falkland/Malvinas Islands conflict between Argentina and Great Britain, the recent dispute between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, but more importantly domestic conflicts triggered by social or political violence, such as Bolivia, Colombia, and Mexico. In the case of intrastate conflicts, international mediation has had little success. In addition to the principle of non-intervention in a state's domestic affairs, mediation through official diplomacy has fewer chances of success when the conflict is political or ideological, compared to when it is territorial.[29] Generally, the approach of multilateral organizations to conflict prevention and conflict resolution limits itself to conflicts driven by political and geographical reasons, rather than social, economic, or cultural divergences.

Preventive diplomacy within the UN system is the "diplomatic action taken, at the earliest possible stage, to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur."[30] However, when looking at past experiences, international intervention often takes place after a conflict has already broken out, and in such case, the chances of preventing further escalation decreases as time goes by. The UN has invested vast resources in preventive diplomacy and has created new instruments to face the challenges to peace. The Mediation Support Unit has established a permanent mediation body. The Group of Friends of Mediation founded in 2010 includes 35 member countries and 7 regional organizations. Despite the collaboration with national and international institutions, as well as civil society organizations, it has not yet fully developed a regional focus on Latin America and the Caribbean, as its only members in the region remain Brazil, Mexico, and Costa Rica.[31]

The ICJ was created within the UN on the lines of the League of Nations's Permanent International Court of Justice. Two limitations immediately surface from this system. First, as explained earlier, the notion of conflict has radically changed from that at the beginning of the twentieth century. Therefore, adopting similar structures may miss the purpose and be counterproductive. Second, ICJ interventions can

only be observed in the case of disputes over territory or the implementation of international treaties and obligations.[32]

At the regional level, the OAS approaches conflict resolution via direct negotiation, mediation, conciliation, and arbitration.[33] The successful outcomes in the disputes between Honduras and Nicaragua (1999-2002) and El Salvador and Honduras (2003-2004), and dialogue facilitation in the cases of Nicaragua (2005), Bolivia (2008), Guatemala (2009), and Honduras (2009), do not shadow the limits of the OAS's conflict prevention policy. In order to better face the challenges in the region, it has created the Department for Democratic Sustainability and Special Actions and has approved the AG/RES. 1080 on Representative Democracy (1991), the Washington Protocol (1992), and the Inter-American Democratic Charter (2001). However it has never adopted conflict prevention as its main organizational focus and it encounters major difficulties when attempting to build consensus among member countries, which remain the main decision makers within the organization. Members have uneven decision-making power and different domestic interests that make it difficult to agree on specific issues of concern.[34]

Government initiatives, such as the Esquipulas Peace Agreement signed by Central American Presidents in 1987, represent an historical achievement for the region. However, national governments have proved unable to decisively contain violence emerging within domestic borders. In 1989 a new internal conflict broke out in Nicaragua. Moreover, Central American states currently face the pervasive effects of drugs and arms trafficking, which is rapidly expanding to other countries in Latin America. Conflicts arising from internal and transnational issues represent a challenge for both prevention and resolution. The government can be either a party in the conflict, or an external actor. Often, the government may lose its legitimacy during the outbreak of violence. As a result, official means of diplomacy and attempts to create dialogue at the institutional level may not be helpful in containing conflict.

Despite the multitude of civil society organizations working through unofficial avenues, little has been done to adopt the necessary human, technical, and financial resources to fight contemporary challenges.[35] This poses a threat not only to security, but also to the sustainable

development of the region. As the Inter-American Bank states "conflicts and the different ways violence is being expressed limit social development opportunities and pose an obstruction for the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals."[36] The Center for American Progress has estimated the total cost of violence in Latin America and the Caribbean to be 7.7% of regional GDP, corresponding to US$ 6.5 billion.[37]

Given the regional issues and traditional conflict resolution practices, two observations can be made. First, the broader approach undertaken solely by multilateral organizations or domestic governments may no longer be sufficient to prevent or solve conflict in Latin America and the Caribbean. Second, given the new threats affecting states and societies, new approaches are necessary to prevent social, economic and political issues from triggering conflict. The region currently lacks adequate tools. Conventional means of conflict resolution have had little success when confronted with the underlying dynamics of contemporary conflicts.[38] Both domestic and international actors face the need to adopt new measures of prevention and resolution. As Machiavelli once wrote "the one who adapts his policy to the times prospers, and likewise that the one whose policy clashes with the demands of the time does not." For the reasons outlined and for the new threats that have the potential to undermine stability and security in Latin America and the Caribbean, new strategies are being explored.

A Regional Mechanism for Peace and Conflict Prevention

In light of the limitations of traditional approaches *vis à vis* new risk factors, alternative methods must be identified and analyzed. It has become increasingly relevant to share knowledge and experience in the field in order to offer viable solutions to reduce conflict and encourage economic and human development. To that end, the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress (a non-profit and non-governmental organization in San José, Costa Rica), the Inter-American Development Bank, and the governments of Costa Rica, El Salvador and Panama are collaborating to establish a regional mechanism for peace and conflict resolution. The project seeks to reduce violence in Latin

America and the Caribbean in order to create a favorable environment for development in the region. With the support of the Inter-American Development Bank, and the technical execution by the Arias Foundation, this initiative seeks to define a new strategy for the region. As an independent and impartial body, with the support of both political institutions and civil society, this mechanism will revolve around the principles of conflict mediation, peaceful resolution, dialogue facilitation and dissemination of best practices. It expects to combine the flexibility and neutrality of a non-governmental organization working in the field of conflict resolution with the support of countries and leaders that share the same goals. The mechanism will work as an independent body that responds to the need and direct invitation of interested parties. It will create a platform for viable tools and instruments to define possible solutions to issues threatening stability.

Given the diversity of challenges and risks, conflict resolution will tend towards a multi-level approach, gaining a broader perspective on the regional, national, and civil level. This involves the integration and coordination among organizations that have well-established networks of competences in conflict prevention. In light of global changes and of new expressions of violence, participation from civil society has become increasingly relevant. Civil diplomacy, also known as Track II Diplomacy, expands the broader concept of multi-track diplomacy.[39] Such approach refers to "peace efforts embarked upon by unofficial, non-governmental organizations and individuals […]"[40] to settle conflicts from an informal perspective, external to political and official routes, by encouraging "communication, understanding and collaboration between antagonistic communities."[41]

Conflicts have evolved such that the government is no longer the main actor, but becomes one of multiple parties or a third actor within the dispute. Thus, reaching consensus at the institutional level might prove difficult or unrealistic if non-state actors are not included in the process. Grassroots approaches might be able to tackle issues that official paths are unlikely to solve.[42] The goal of unofficial actors is the same as that of governmental and international peace builders and mediators, namely the reduction and eradication of violence and conflict between contrasting parties. What differentiates them is their approach. Unofficial methods include programs for peace education,

workshops, and panels to create grounds for dialogue among civil society and facilitate positive interaction among parties involved in the conflict, whereas Track I actors are often led by the sole objective of brokering an official agreement. This presents few disadvantages that may have repercussions on the sustainability of peace in the long run. In the process of conflict prevention and peace building, all factors should be evaluated within the relevant context in order to weigh them adequately during the mediation process.

Given the availability of new instruments of diplomacy, the regional strategy for peace building will revolve around three interdependent courses of action.

1. Observation and Early Warning

An observation center will carry out a monitoring and observation function, in strategic collaboration with local actors, academics, and public institutions. All social environments are interdependent and in continuous interaction, which causes incessant changes that may weaken the stability of the system as a whole.[43] The observation center will develop research methods that will detect valuable information, facilitate the transmission of early warning reports to partner organizations and initiate technical assistance for the necessary actions and practices to adopt.

Early warning practices "are designed to detect and signal conflicts for the purpose of making possible the use of preventive action instead of reactive action."[44] The information collected through observation and data analysis offers a snapshot of the situation, showing the imminent risk factors.[45] These actions have been thoroughly refined, particularly within multilateral organizations, which recognize the need to take a steadier preventive stance *vis à vis* the threat of conflict. However, despite the will of favoring prevention against reaction, these organizations have encountered several difficulties. Such organizations with a widespread focus on a variety of fields often lack a specialized understanding of minor factors fueling conflict. Moreover, they are too often limited by bureaucratic procedures, which significantly reduce their flexibility and ability to grasp relevant information in a timely manner.[46] Moreover, once early warnings are passed on within the organization, automatic responses are never taken for granted.

Many decision makers take a long time to weigh costs and benefits of preventive intervention. As resources are never unlimited, there is a tendency to prioritize conflicts that have reached more advanced and violent stages. Therefore, early warning depends on both the disposition of actors to carry out preventive actions and on the ability to employ available resources within short notice. The earlier a warning is transmitted, the greater the options to intervene preventively.[47]

The role of civil society has gained a primary position in early warning practices. Its involvement increases the efforts to reduce political, economic and human costs caused by violence.[48] Civil groups and organizations have the advantage of close proximity and the ability to observe through expert eyes the key factors of a conflict.[49] An example of existing organizations dedicated to early warning is the International Crisis Group (ICG). The ICG was established after the tragedies of Rwanda and Bosnia, where the international community failed to react to the threat of genocide and war. In addition to its headquarters, the Group established field offices with the goal of keeping the finger on the pulse of unstable environments through the so-called "conflict watch". This has made its work unique in advancing early warning for cases that presented the risk of violent outbreak.[50]

2. Transferring Skills and Knowledge

Observation and monitoring will not remain isolated actions, but will constitute a permanent interdisciplinary activity. By favoring the collaboration among different organizations and experts in the field, the regional mechanism will be able to draw information and resources from specialized actors, who are familiar with the ground approaches and are capable of facilitating information sharing.[51] In this sense, the aim is to identify organizations and actors that are able to apply their expertise to the preventive actions. From a governmental perspective, countries endorsing the project have individually developed local strategies in order to improve their approach towards the prevention of conflict. Panama has broadened its strategy to include greater civil participation. The "System of Judicial Facilitators" receives its legitimacy to act from civil society itself. With the goal of resolving controversies arising within local communities, facilitators collaborate closely with the people outside the formal ways of the judicial system.[52] In Costa Rica, Civic Centers for the promotion of peace and the Minister of

Justice and Peace seek to advance peace education and peaceful conflict resolution at the community level.[53] El Salvador's Undersecretary for Governance and State Modernization created a body for Conflict Management with respect to labor, social, and communitarian issues. Moreover, in Latin America and the Caribbean there are a plethora of non-governmental organizations and groups with a focus on social, economic, political, and environmental subjects. These are usually small bodies, with limited resources but with a sound network and organizational structure that allows them to act where official actors cannot stretch their arm. In this perspective, a regional platform seeks to act in two ways. On one hand, it would represent a platform for these actors to interact and share relevant information. On the other hand, it would draw from the knowledge and best practices from both fronts, official and unofficial, in order to create a broadly applicable strategy. The mechanism will not substitute the work of these bodies, but that it will act as a complementary parallel system. The Toledo International Centre for Peace (CITpax), for example, is representative of such "parallel diplomacy." Its aims include supporting democracy, dialogue, and peace consolidation by seeking alternative ways to strengthen both institutions and society.[54]

The scope of the regional mechanism goes beyond the pre-escalation phase of a conflict. The outcomes of preventive action are not always immediately observable and, if not successful, a conflict can escalate rapidly to a more violent stage. The transfer of skills and competences among third parties aims at containing escalation, while further analysis is conducted with respect to the strategic aspects of violence. At the same time, giving voice to all parties and understanding the roots and repercussions of conflict is of crucial importance. In this process, so-called confidence building measures play a key role in the early stages of a conflict, as parties are brought closer together to facilitate a more peaceful interaction. "[Confidence-Building Measures] are agreements between two or more parties regarding exchanges of information and verification, typically with respect to the use of military forces and armaments."[55] They can be employed through different routes and can involve military, political, and cultural factors, with the goal of decreasing violence and increasing cooperation.[56]

3. *Technical assistance*

Lastly, the mechanism will provide technical assistance to mediation
processes. With the support of specialists in mediation practices it will
be possible to elaborate alternative routes to resolution. This process
summarizes all former actions, from synthesizing best practices per-
formed by existing organizations to a formal and informal institutional
analysis. Conflict mediation is "a process in which an impartial third
party helps disputants resolve a dispute or plan a transaction, but does
not have the power to impose a binding solution."[57] Many organiza-
tions, such as the NGO Club de Madrid with its Mediation Support
Project, offer their assistance to the parties by acquiring the knowledge
and exploring the resources indispensable for initiating negotiations.
Club de Madrid has created a sound network of experts and former
heads of state that provide their expertise in the diplomatic field, while
not undermining its independence.[58]

Despite the multiplicity of alternative mediation approaches, the
majority of mediators define their actions based on a variety of con-
flict factors. The goal is to achieve a transformation of the conflict
through a regional focus that allows a closer perspective on the social
and cultural aspects around which conflicting parties interact. John
Paul Lederach defines conflict transformation as the "building of
right relationships and social structures through a radical respect for
human rights, and nonviolence as way of life."[59] Moreover, so-called
"transformative mediation" described by Baruch Bush and Joseph
Folger refers to a process involving the empowerment and recognition
of individuals.[60] Existing non-governmental organizations, such as
Search For Common Ground, define their mission around the concept
of conflict transformation. By adopting a grassroot approach, it seeks
to directly engage civil society and actors to create room for dialogue
and build consensus.[61] Similarly, the regional mechanism aims at
generating "sustainable dialogue" among parties. Focus is addressed
towards relations that create tension and represent an obstacle to the
attainment of peace. Actions will include: ad hoc observatory missions,
development of a mediation strategy, and processes to facilitate social
dialogue.[62] By adopting an intermediary position, halfway between
formal institutions and civil society, this strategy has the ability to
influence transformation at all levels. It should be noted that the

regional mechanism remains an independent actor that intervenes only when parties call for its involvement.

4. Challenges and Advantages

Overall, the regional strategy for peace seeks to add value to existing methodologies by bringing them together through the implementation of alternative approaches. Until now, in the presence of minor violence or low-scale conflict, governments have tended to avoid an immediate intervention of multilateral organizations, as it would have increased the level of institutionalization of the conflict. The alternative approach represented by independent organizations offers the flexibility necessary to address an unstable, yet not fully developed and unclear conflict situation from the beginning. The effectiveness of the regional mechanism stems from its role as an independent, yet perpetually committed institution that relies on the successful experience of individuals who are able to contribute to conflict resolution processes. The value added will be that of bringing together the expertise in conflict prevention and conflict mediation by laying the basis for best practices and contributing to their dissemination. It will define its own strategy for resolving conflict by acting independently and creating a platform where regional organizations and institutions can work together to build peace in the region.

The project faces unavoidable challenges, principally the acquisition of financial support. The development of a financial strategy in support of the project is necessary; nevertheless, an independent organization should always be cautious in approving its sources of financing. It is difficult to renounce to certain sources, but it is often necessary to do so when they may undermine the ability to act independently and free of any external constraints. Moreover, many donors and benefactors are reluctant to provide financial support to conflict prevention actions when it is difficult to define what is being prevented.[63]

Third-party actors must recognize the challenges and perils of alternative diplomatic routes in conflict prevention and mediation. The risk of manipulation or limitation by official parties cannot be completely eliminated. The ability to communicate and interact directly with the people involved in a conflict is a great virtue but also a great challenge that does may not be easily overcome by all.[64] Misinterpretation and miscommunication are often overlooked and may give way to further

obstacles in the peace building process.[65] It is vital to elaborate an effective political communication strategy, maintain regular meetings with individuals and institutional representatives, who will play a key role in the initial phases of implementation, and clearly define the Mechanism's projects and related activities. It will be necessary adopt the necessary tools of performance measurement, as it is only through constant feedback that early warning practices, knowledge-sharing, and mediation processes can offer a viable response to contemporary challenges.

Conclusions

As the rest of the world, Latin America and the Caribbean have undergone deep structural and systemic changes that have given way to unfamiliar forms of violence and conflict. Domestic and transnational issues have gained primary importance in the definition of both national and international security policies. However, it appears that traditional measures have encountered little room for action and have obtained scarce results. As these new challenges arise from within individual states, the involvement of civil society has become inevitable in searching alternative responses to the needs of contemporary Latin American societies.

To this end, an independent and impartial regional mechanism for peace and conflict resolution is explored to reduce violence and the risk of conflict in the region. Refinement of early warning practices, development of best conflict resolution practices, and assistance in mediation processes constitute the bulk of such approach. Cooperation with both official and non-governmental organizations is considered pivotal. So-called multitrack diplomacy sheds light on factors that are often overlooked in top-down approaches,[66] as greater contact and interaction with the parties and actors involved facilitate a broader understanding of the conflict.

The role of civil society has expanded, and unofficial diplomatic routes may support or even prevail where official meetings are impeded by structural hurdles. An extra-official viewpoint addresses communities and individuals at the lower levels of society going beyond the undifferentiated group that rarely reflects internal dynamics. In addition to creating

room for dialogue, it allows a greater chance for impacting the mindset of individuals, empowering them, and increasing the strength to act from the local level in a bottom-up perspective.[67] Civil organizations are characterized by a high degree of adaptability to changing environments, which together with their focus on a specific region or issue provides them with diplomatic instruments that official tracks often lack.[68]

Moreover, it is only through the continuous endorsement of adhering countries and of institutional and governmental actors that the mechanism will be able to obtain positive results. Organizations in the field of conflict prevention and peace building often claim their independence to the point of lacking adequate support from both national and international institutions. However, it is unavoidable that civil society receives its legitimacy from the state, which constitutes the structure and organization of society itself.[69]

The executive body of the regional mechanism does count for a solid network of representatives of both government and civil society, as well as the required expertise and means to attain the region's goals.[70] Each one of the countries and governments that currently endorse the project is concerned with its own challenges and goals, but they all support the mechanism equally. While Panama faces increasing tensions within the environmental and cultural contexts, El Salvador seeks to support a mechanism that draws from best practices in the field of conflict prevention and resolution, and Costa Rica is committed to transmitting its own experience as well as learning from others'. Stemming from advantageous south-south cooperation, may be the best response to the changes and challenges affecting the region of Latin America and the Caribbean.

NOTES

1. Carl von Clausewitz (2008). *On War*, trans. Colonel J.J. Graham. Digireads.com, 2008, 23

2. For the purpose of this article the term 'conflict' refers to violent conflict

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ABSTRACT

The Transformation of Conflict in Latin America. Towards Peacebuilding from a Regional Perspective: A Project by the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress

Since the end of the Cold War, and the turn of the century in particular, forms of conflict have changed radically. In step with the world trend since the 1990s, Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced a redistribution of economic and political power that gives rise to new social, economic and environmental risk factors for conflict. Countries' state capacity has decreased and multilateral organizations are struggling to adapt to the rapid changes. As the role of traditional conflict resolution strategies and actors at both the domestic and international level have proven no longer sufficient, non-institutional actors are exploring new channels of conflict resolution and peace building in Latin America and the Caribbean. This article analyzes contemporary security challenges and explores an alternative approach to conflict prevention and peace building in the region.

Resumen

La transformación del conflicto en América Latina. Hacia la Construcción de la Paz desde un perspectiva regional: Un proyecto de la Fundación Arias para la Paz y el Progreso Humano

Desde el fin de la Guerra Fría y particularmente desde el cambio de siglo, las formas de conflicto han cambiado radicalmente. A tono con la tendencia mundial desde 1990, América Latina y el Caribe han experimentado una redistribución de poder económico y político que dio lugar a nuevos factores de riesgo social, económico y ambiental para el conflicto. La capacidad del estado de esos países se ha reducido y las organizaciones multilaterales están luchando para adaptarse a los rápidos cambios. Dado que las estrategias y el rol de los actores involucrados en la resolución de conflictos tanto a nivel nacional como internacional han demostrado ser insuficientes, otros actores no institucionales están explorando nuevos canales de resolución de conflictos y construcción de la paz en América Latina y el Caribe. Este artículo analiza los desafíos actuales en el ámbito de la seguridad y explora un enfoque alternativo para la prevención de conflictos y la construcción de la paz en la región.

Summario

A transformação do conflito na América Latina. Rumo à Construção da Paz em uma perspectiva regional: um projeto da Fundação Arias para a Paz e o Progresso Humano

Desde o fim da guerra fria e, particularmente, desde a virada do século, as formas de conflito mudaram radicalmente. Em sintonia com a tendência mundial a partir de 1990, a América Latina e o Caribe experimentaram uma redistribuição de poder econômico e político que deu lugar a novos fatores de risco social, econômico e ambiental para o conflito. A capacidade do Estado desses países foi reduzida e as organizações multilaterais estão lutando para adaptar-se às rápidas transformações. Dado que as estratégias e o papel dos atores envolvidos na resolução de conflitos tanto em nível nacional como internacional demostraram ser insuficientes, outros atores não institucionais estão explorando novos canais de resolução de conflitos e construção da paz na América Latina e no Caribe. Este artigo analisa os desafios atuais no âmbito da segurança e explora um enfoque alternativo para a prevenção de conflitos e a construção da paz na região.