

**SECRETARY-GENERAL'S SENIOR ADVISOR ON POLICY  
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**REMARKS TO THE GOTHENBURG POLICY DIALOGUE  
"PRACTITIONERS AND RESEARCHERS: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM EACH OTHER"  
GOTHENBURG, 30 May 2018**

Professors Lindberg and Goksör,  
Distinguished colleagues from the research and policy communities,  
Ladies and gentlemen.

Allow me first to express my sincere thanks, on behalf of the Secretary-General, to the University of Gothenburg and its affiliates for the invitation to join you in today's dialogue between the worlds of academic research and practitioners. How we might bring these worlds closer together in the interest of better policy and to benefit those at risk of or suffering from the effects of violent conflict around the world is a matter of critical importance.

***The changing global peace and security landscape***

This year's Policy Dialogue Day is taking place against a backdrop of unprecedented challenges to the global multilateral system. We see shifts in geopolitics, worrisome trends in national political discourse, declining trust in multilateral institutions and a resurgence of isolationist policies. And yet, the Organization's mandate to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" is more important than ever. The resurgence of violence and the intractable nature of ongoing conflicts form part of a complex array of challenges to international peace and security. By 2030, the target for achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, more than half of the world's poor will be in countries affected by high levels of violence.

Meanwhile, many of these conflicts feature new or emerging threats to peace and security that we, to be frank, sometimes struggle to fully understand. The challenges of climate change, transnational organized crime, new technology and global financial shocks are testing the absorptive capacity of the international system. Competition in cyber

space, growth in the power of computing and artificial intelligence, and the development of new weapons technologies present new means and arenas for conflict and have made global security less predictable.

On the ground, the UN's peace operations face enormous challenges in keeping pace with the evolving landscape of peace and security. In places like Syria, Somalia and the Sahel, the UN is grappling with new types of non-state actors and complex webs of international, regional and local political dynamics, which in turn raises critical questions for how our tools should evolve. In countries facing the risk of new and recurring conflict, suspicions of external interference, the contestation of international norms, and disunity among great powers have made the deployment and effective use of the UN's tools for conflict prevention such as preventive diplomacy and mediation even more difficult.

### ***The Secretary-General's agenda for prevention***

It is in this context that the Secretary-General has articulated a broad agenda to refocus the work of the United Nations on prevention. As myriad crises of unprecedented complexity continue to plague the international community and elicit starkly different views on how to respond, the Secretary-General has made the case in the Security Council, the General Assembly and elsewhere that we spend too much of our time and resources on managing conflicts and lose many opportunities to prevent them in the first place.

An agenda for prevention is not a re-conceptualizing of the United Nations, but rather a focusing of the Organization's work on its fundamental objectives, principles and comparative advantages. It is rooted in the UN's role in preventing violent conflict, described in the Preamble to the Charter as the objective of saving "succeeding generations from the scourge of war" and in the first sentence of Article 1, which calls for "effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace ...", but also extends beyond conflict to embrace other threats – climate change and pandemics for example – that have the potential to inflict harm humanity.

### ***The importance of academic research to the UN's work***

If the UN is to remain relevant and effective in responding to today's threats, we must have a full understanding of the scope of the challenges we face. We must identify areas where new norms are required. We must

be ready to shepherd the international community towards solutions. This is where the research community comes in.

Today's discussion offers a unique and all too rare opportunity for researchers and policymakers to engage each-other directly on these challenges. We need help understanding the drivers and causes of conflict at the local, national, regional and, in some cases, international levels. We equally need help understanding how our actions – or our inaction – might affect a situation.

The speed of change has revealed, or even further magnified, some “blind spots” in our understanding of, and response to, new conflict. We don't fully understand how threats interact with and amplify each-other. We do not hear enough insights or voices from the global south – where most of the conflicts are located. Headquarters-based policy discourses in New York and Geneva are dominated by researchers from the global north disadvantaging valuable approaches and insights, and skewing the selection of issues. And we lack the capacity to absorb and synthesise available research, which leads to a disconnect between what information the UN needs to support its work and what is being produced in the research community.

This points to two important areas where the research and practitioner worlds could come closer together to produce better policy and operational strategy. First, there is an opportunity to better frame and communicate the UN's needs, and in turn for researchers to sharpen the focus of their work on these priority areas. Second, there are a number of methodological steps researchers could take, and institutional steps the UN could take, which together, could improve the uptake of research by practitioners.

### ***Priority areas of research for the UN***

Let me first speak to the priority areas in which research could help the UN respond to some of the most pressing challenges it faces. I see four in particular.

The first is better understanding conflict drivers and the root causes of conflict. While the UN possesses an exceptional cadre of analysts and country experts, we recognise our limitations in identifying and understanding what drives conflict in a given country or region, particularly with respect to quantitative research. In many conflict settings, the UN is engaged in tackling the symptoms of conflicts rather than their

actual root causes: this can arguably be said of DRC, Syria and Burundi. In that last country, the UN has engaged in peacekeeping, political and electoral observation missions – back-to-back – and is at the drawing board yet again to respond to renewed conflict.

Secondly, we require greater breadth and depth of research on gender-related aspects of conflict. This should cover a full range of areas, from women’s participation in conflict prevention and resolution, their involvement in governance structures, and the extent of their access to law and justice, to the disproportionate effects of armed conflict on the security, health and economic empowerment of women. At a time when the global community’s attention is largely focused on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, gender statistics and in-depth research are largely missing in conflict settings, and the agenda fails to capture the specific needs and challenges limiting progress for women living in conflict-affected settings.

A third area where more research is required is on the political economy of conflict. The UN struggles to integrate the economic drivers of conflict – such as conflict over land and mining rights, or migration – with our political analysis to the extent that we should. Personnel working at the sub-national level often have a good understanding of the dynamics characterising conflicts at the local level, such as the motivations of the multitude of armed groups in Libya or the dynamics between IDP sites as local communities in South Sudan, but this rarely translates in a broader understanding of how the conflict is shaped by socio-economic factors.

Fourth and finally are the regional dimensions of conflict that are increasingly relevant to the day-to-day changes on the ground, but are both difficult to analyse and sensitive to address politically. We need a better understanding of the impact of regional political competition, transnational organised crime, human trafficking, and terrorist movements on national- and regional-level dynamics.

### ***Improving research uptake***

Let me now address some ways in which I believe that we might work together to strengthen the uptake of research. Here again, I see three opportunities.

First, for the UN, we must do more to lower the barriers to access for researchers. We need to reach out to experts more proactively to share

their research, advice on analytical questions, and offer arms-length assessments of our work. In doing so, we must ensure that access is equitable across all regions of the world and to researchers of all genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations and critical perspectives. We also must strike a balance between formal and informal engagement with advisory groups or institutional partnerships. It is my sense that more flexible modalities for engagement are the most effective, but these must be based on more than personal relationships.

Second, for research to inform good UN policy and practice, it must be gender-sensitive and data must be disaggregated by gender. Women are half of the world's population—and the challenges they face in conflict and post-conflict settings differ from those of men. UN policy and practice can hence only be effective if it is based on a sound understanding of how gender power dynamics operate in such settings. We now have a relatively sound understanding, for example, of the centrality of women's participation in peace negotiations for the durability of peace agreements and the extent to which they commit to gender equality.

But the inclusion of gender equality provisions in outcome documents is only the first step. To follow through on actual processes of implementation it would be essential to know how to design law and justice institutions to be gender-responsive; how to make investments in infrastructure, public services and social protection measures rights-based and responsive to women's specific interests and constraints; and how to shape macroeconomic policies in ways that enhance women's livelihoods and employment options. Robust comparative research can help us to understand and influence the factors that help or hinder the advancement of women's rights as societies emerge from conflict and rebuild their economies and societies. There are, course, other filters that should be considered as well, in addition to gender, including sexual diversity, the experiences of those who are differently abled, and the elderly.

Third, research is more likely to be taken up by practitioners if timelines match and analytical questions are calibrated to operational needs. For example, we sometimes see research that looks at the broad impact of, say, UN peacekeeping over the course of the UN's existence. Conclusions about peacekeeping at this level make for useful talking points, but are arguably too broad to help policy makers decide how to orient this tool in the short-to medium-term future. At the other end of the spectrum, research questions that look at a minute aspects of conflict phenomena will not necessarily lend themselves well to integration into institutional

approaches and strategies. Greater interaction between researchers and practitioners at the research design phase could go a long way in addressed this issue.

Finally, we need to improve access to and engagement with research for our colleagues outside of Headquarters. Few of the UN's peace operations have established good networks with leading country experts who they consult on a regular basis, both inside and outside their countries and regions. And where they do, engagement tends to be ad hoc, limited to very few experts, and infrequent. Research that is designed around the analytical and planning functions in mission and non-mission settings would create incentives for this engagement among UN personnel.

### ***Conclusion***

I am eager to hear your thoughts and discuss where we go from here. But let me assure you that the United Nations is keen to explore deeper and more frequent engagement with academics and researchers. We strongly believe that sustained relationships and dialogue between experts with the UN and those in academia and think tanks will foster mutual benefits. These should include better understanding of the intricacies and challenges affecting conflict and international responses around the world, more meaningful policy-oriented research, and improved outcomes in our practice across the peace and security spectrum.

Thank you.