

A NEW VISION OF PEACE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

The concept of a culture of peace arose at the end of the Cold War. For the first time, the objective for which the United Nations was founded, the abolition of war, had become feasible. The United Nations agency for education and culture, UNESCO, had engaged in activities to promote a culture of peace from its beginnings, when it was founded in the aftermath of the Second World War to construct the defences of peace in the minds of men and women. However, because of the Cold War there were severe limits on what could be accomplished.

The concept of a culture of peace was formulated by the International Congress on Peace in the Minds of Men that was held in the heart of Africa (Yamoussoukro, Cote d'Ivoire, 1989). In its final declaration, the Congress recommended UNESCO to "...help construct a new vision of peace by developing a peace culture based on the universal values of respect for life, liberty, justice, solidarity, tolerance, human rights and equality between men and women". The term peace culture was inspired by the 1986 initiative "Cultura da Paz" in Peru. It was also inspired by the Seville Statement on Violence, elaborated in 1986 by scientists from around the world, which stated scientifically and categorically that war is not determined by genes, "violent brains", "human nature", or "instincts", but was rather a social invention. Therefore, "the same species that invented war is capable of inventing peace."

In 1992, UNESCO's Executive Board requested a specific programme for a culture of peace as a contribution to United Nations peacekeeping efforts. Reasoning that peacekeeping operations alone might assure the absence of war but could not by themselves bring a positive, dynamic peace, UNESCO argued in 1992 that this could be done best by engaging those who had been in conflict in common ventures of human development. Acting primarily in the fields of education, science, culture and communication, UNESCO offered its services in "post-conflict peace-building". Projects were undertaken in a number of countries of Central America, Africa, as well as in collaboration with the government of the Philippines. The most extensive was in El Salvador, as described in the article by Lacayo et al. A comprehensive overview of the culture of peace at this early stage is contained in the monograph, "UNESCO and A Culture of Peace: Building a Global Movement."

Lessons were learned from post-conflict peace-building, but it was argued by Member States from the South that the real challenge was to develop a culture of peace in the North. They asked "where do the guns weapons come from, and the violent films, and who sets the terms of trade that lead to poverty?" It is therefore of considerable importance that a national project is now underway for the first time in the North - in the Russian Federation.

As the concept matured, the culture of peace began to be understood as a profound shift from the dominant civilizational traits associated with war and violence to a new culture of peace and non-violence. The culture of war and violence - power as violence, hierarchical authority, the necessity of an enemy, male domination, secrecy, exploitation and sharpening of inequalities - had both come from and contributed to the institution of war and to the very foundation of the nation-state and other institutions derived from it. The alternatives to this culture are already being developed at many points in society: power as dialogue, democratic participation in decision-making, universal tolerance and solidarity, equality of women, free flow of information, and development seen as a participative process. The meaning and significance of a culture of peace, its aims, major fields and actors are stated in the Draft Declaration for a Culture of Peace that is included in UN document A/53/370.

As stated in the draft UN Declaration, peace is not the absence of conflict, but "a positive, dynamic, participatory process linked intrinsically to democratic principles and development for all, by which differences are respected, dialogue encouraged and conflicts constantly transformed by non-violent means into new understanding and cooperation."

From its beginning, the concept of a culture of peace was adopted with enthusiasm by non-governmental organizations, including those of the traditional peace movement. Many examples were already available by 1994 and included in the monograph mentioned above. At the upcoming conference in May 1999 of the Hague Appeal for Peace, sponsored by many international peace organizations, a culture of peace will be one of four main "strands", along with disarmament, international law and conflict resolution. The theme has also been taken up by the Nobel Peace laureates, who have called for a decade for the culture of peace and non-violence. It is the first time they have unanimously endorsed an initiative.

Over the years, the culture of peace has gained increasing recognition from the United Nations General Assembly. Support has come mainly from Member States from the South. The North, on the other hand, has been much slower to support a culture of peace. It may be argued that this is because the concept supports the "democratization of the war/peace issue" - giving as much power in these decisions to small and poor countries as to those that are large and wealthy.

By 1997 support was strong enough to over-ride opposition from the European Union, and the General Assembly requested a draft Declaration and Programme of Action for a Culture of Peace. As a result, document (A/53/370) was prepared. This text, available from the United Nations in New York, is the most definitive presentation yet of the culture of peace. The General Assembly is expected to revise and adopt the Declaration and Programme of Action in early 1999.

Also in 1997, the General Assembly proclaimed the Year 2000 as the International Year for the Culture of Peace. Further, on 10 November 1998, the General Assembly approved an ECOSOC request, based on the proposal of the Nobel peace

laureates mentioned above, to proclaim the decade of 2001-2010 as a decade for a culture of peace and non-violence. Many of the speakers in the GA debate requested that the Millennium Assembly in the Year 2000 should take as its major theme the culture of peace.

Planning is now underway to insure that the International Year involves the largest number of people possible, not only in a superficial way, but also in substantive, long-term actions that promote a culture of peace. A manifesto has been drafted by some of the Nobel peace laureates and circulated to their colleagues for signature - following which there will be an international drive to gain signatures on the manifesto and to present them to the UN Millennium Assembly. The manifesto signals a personal commitment to work for a culture of peace in everyday life. A major publicity drive will also be undertaken on a global scale, including a round-the-world telecast of celebrations to open the Year on 21 September 1999 - the International Day of Peace.

The Year and Decade challenges everyone - the UN, regional organizations, the Member States, NGO's and individuals everywhere to begin a "civilizational change". This can replace the values, attitudes and behaviours that underlie war and violence with those values, attitudes and behaviours that ensure a constant, non-violent process of democratization and social justice in the new millennium.

References:

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