Topic: Why is Bureaucracy Resistant to Conflict Prevention?

Speakers: Dr. Harold Saunders & Richard McCall

The inaugural meeting of the Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum was well attended (about 60 people). The speakers were Richard McCall, Chief of Staff at USAID and Dr. Harold Saunders, Director of International Affairs at the Kettering Foundation. Richard McCall was very kind to agree to speak at the last minute, instead of Brian Atwood, former Administrator of USAID and currently Executive Vice President at the Citizens Energy Corp., who could not speak because he had to go to Nigeria at the invitation of the country’s President.

RICHARD MCCALL briefly reviewed the history of conflict in the twentieth century: the two World Wars, the Depression years, and the changing nature of conflicts in the post Cold War period. He noted that the number of complex emergencies, stemming from collapsed states or civil strife, had gone from three in 1986 to more than thirty today.

He touched on the creation of international institutions to serve post-World War socio-political needs. New bureaucracies were created and others restructured to manage the Cold War. Tools created at that time are still with us, and it is difficult to change the tools to deal with new international realities and the changing nature of conflicts from inter-state to intra-state ones. Fiefdoms created earlier are now unwilling to be coordinated and pursue agendas that conflict with current needs. Agencies are pursuing limited budget resources, which are being reallocated from development needs to complex emergency situations.

There is a need to:
- Improve ways in which information and analysis flow from researchers to policy-makers to enable a better understanding of the problems.
- Reduce the present gap between our understanding of what we would like to achieve in conflict mitigation, management, and resolution; and how to do it.
- Have a strategic definition of problems that arise in the complex emergencies and conflict of today.

He reviewed the catastrophe in the Great Lakes Region in 1996-97 and the inadequate responses of the international community. Drawing on the work of British historian John Hosking “Russia: People and Empire”, he focused on the two aspects of nationhood: The civic part, where citizens participate in the creation and development of the rules and institutions of civil society; and the ethnic part, where a community is bound together by a common culture, traditions, and history. He said that in many conflicted societies today, while national boundaries define states and there is a sense of community at the local level, there is no sense of national community. The multi-ethnic nature of many states makes development of a national community difficult. That makes it hard to define a national identity and purpose and develop an equitable and democratic society.

He concluded by saying that we have to be willing to recognize these problems associated with the changes in the international system and the corrosive cultural conflicts found therein. Public leadership
should be in search not just for power but also for knowledge, but our real task is to comprehend a series of profound structural changes in our society and our world.

**DR. HAROLD SAUNDERS** made a very eloquent presentation drawing on his vast experience of dealing with various conflicts. After touching on some of the same themes as Dick McCall regarding the changing nature and characteristics of conflicts, he focused on the central issue of understanding relationships among individuals, groups, and states. Prevention and resolution of conflicts at any level requires sustained dialogue among the people involved -- the people who represent the groups in conflict and the people they represent. Relationships at the state level are political processes of continuous interaction across borders.

He said that relationships involve the following five elements:

1) *Identity*: human experience that brings us where we are. This is true of individuals and groups as well as states.
2) *Interest*: what people really care about. Behind the positions that people take, we need to understand their real interests. People’s and groups’ interests are not set in concrete – they change over time and as circumstances evolve.
3) *Power*: a part of every relationship. The most important component of power is the ability to change the course of events rather than the ability to force people to do one’s will.
4) *Perception*: the way we behave towards other people is strongly influenced by our perceptions of them. Perceptions are shaped, more often than not, by stereotypes and misperceptions based on limited and sometimes wrong information and limited exposure to people.
5) *Patterns of interaction*: how we interact can be as important as the substance of the interaction.

Understanding these different elements of relationships is critical. Understanding without adverse judgement and respect for other people’s point of view are fundamental. The way people and groups behave can be altered by changing any one or more of the five elements of a relationship.

Hal Saunders provided various interesting examples of how sensitive negotiations he was involved in were critically affected by the focus on people and their relationships. The outcomes achieved as a result seemed nearly impossible at the start of the negotiations.