

# THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE PREVENTION OF ARMED CONFLICT

A GLOBAL PROGRAMME  
LEADING TO AN  
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
AT UNITED NATIONS  
HEADQUARTERS IN 2005



**GLOBAL  
PARTNERSHIP  
FOR THE  
PREVENTION  
OF ARMED  
CONFLICT**

Update January 2004

*'I urge NGOs with an interest in conflict prevention to organise an international conference of local, national and international NGOs on their role in conflict prevention and future interaction with the United Nations in this field.'*

Report of the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Armed Conflict, Recommendation 27 (June 2001).

*The global conflict prevention community has already responded to the Secretary-General's appeal. This brochure contains the framework proposed by civil society that will discard global conflict management in favour of prevention. Regional civil society consultations on prevention are already underway. Over the next two years these discussions will build toward an Agenda for Prevention to be discussed by governments and civil society at the United Nations in 2005.*



THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

31 May 2002

Dear Mr. van Tongeren,

Thank you for your letter of 22 March 2002 expressing the willingness of the European Centre for Conflict Prevention to take on an important role in following up recommendation 27 of my report on the Prevention of Armed Conflict.

I support wholeheartedly your initiative to organize regional preparatory meetings leading to an international conference of local, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the area of conflict prevention. I understand that the purpose of these meetings will be to help NGOs further define their roles and future interaction with the United Nations. This is directly in line with my report, which emphasizes that national actors bear the primary responsibility for conflict prevention, while noting that NGOs and civil society also have a major role in this regard.

The report focuses on the positive potential of a wide spectrum of NGOs engaged in conflict prevention. It is therefore important that the meetings you propose be as broadly inclusive and diverse as possible. I welcome your suggestion that the conference should be a real participatory process and trust that you will actively encourage broad geographical representation and a sense of ownership among the conflict prevention NGO community. I would also urge you to consider the contributions that regional organizations and various United Nations agencies can make to the process.

Your initiative is a timely and important contribution to engaging civil society in the task of developing a culture of prevention in the international community. As you embark on this important project, I wish you every success.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Annan', written in a cursive style.

Kofi A. Annan

Mr. Paul van Tongeren  
Executive Director  
European Centre for Conflict Prevention  
Utrecht

# July 2003: the story so far

In 2002, in response to the Secretary-General's Recommendation 27 (see front cover), the European Centre for Conflict Prevention (ECCP) proposed an integrated global programme of research, consultation and discussion, leading to an international conference at UN Headquarters in New York. Kofi Annan supported the initiative (see p.2) and an intensive period of consultation within the conflict prevention community began. The outcome was an International Preparatory Meeting, scheduled for Nairobi in June 2003, but switched at the last minute to the Netherlands for security reasons. Sixty delegates from all over the world met in the Dutch town of Soesterberg to discuss the purpose and planning of the programme. The scheme outlined in this brochure is the product of their discussions.

At Soesterberg delegates from all over the world selected an International Steering Group (ISG) to oversee the programme. The ECCP's offer to act as its secretariat was accepted. The delegates agreed a lightweight but robust co-ordinating structure to unite coherently the various regional initiatives: a series of parallel regional processes, flexible enough to encompass regional differences but sufficiently aligned to give coherence to the whole. These regional processes, described in this brochure, are the heart of the project. They offer each region a set of unprecedented opportunities: to influence international policy and thinking on conflict prevention; to clarify their relations with the UN and its agencies; to build better relations with governments; to consolidate their networks: and to set their own Regional Agendas for the coming decade.

Some regions have robust functioning networks while others are in the formative stages but all are focused on the long-term goal of conflict prevention as an achievable goal. The ISG will remain provisional until each region is represented and has therefore asked the ECCP to continue driving the project until its membership has been finalised. Since everybody needs information to develop their plans, the ECCP is issuing this brochure, which is likewise provisional. This brochure will be updated as the initiative unfolds.

# Objective and goals

## **Overall objective:**

To develop a common platform for effective action in conflict prevention from the community to the global level.

## **First goal**

To produce Regional Agendas for Conflict Prevention, leading to an International Agenda that will set the standard for seeking non-violent solutions to conflict in the decades ahead.

## **Second goal**

To explore fully the role of civil society in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

## **Third goal**

To improve the interaction between Civil Society Organisations (including NGOs), the UN, regional organisations and governments.

## **Fourth goal**

To strengthen regional and international networking between the partners in the conflict prevention process.

## **Fifth goal**

To promote the development of a coherent body of research and theory that will help the conflict prevention community play its full part in international debate.

# International context

As Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), conflict prevention groups face many difficult issues. Many of the delegates at Soesterberg spoke of the problems of establishing genuine co-operation with governments and with the UN and its agencies. There is of course wide regional variation, but it was generally felt that many opportunities are being missed. At the same time, it was understood that the role of civil society in this field remains undefined and that questions of CSO accountability, legitimacy and transparency have yet to be faced.

Within the conflict prevention community itself, delegates saw lack of co-ordination leading to duplication and competition, reducing the effectiveness of everyone's efforts. Improved networking was seen as a partial solution, but the need for greater discipline cannot be ignored.

The reluctance of governments to admit non-state actors to the business of peace and security runs counter to the growing importance of civil society in other areas. One of the most striking features of the major international conferences held on global themes over the last decade, has been the huge increase in NGO involvement and influence. This has not been the case in the area of peace and security. Yet as the Carnegie Commission has argued: 'The prevention of deadly conflict is, over the long term, too hard - intellectually, technically and politically - to be the responsibility of any single institution or government, no matter how powerful. Strengths must be pooled, burdens shared and labour divided among actors. This is a practical necessity.' The EU has endorsed the theme in the Helsingborg Agenda: 'Our common ambition is to enhance our co-operation with NGOs, civil society, the business community and research institutions in the implementation of the conflict prevention agenda', while the UNDP has subtly bridged the divide by recognising that 'CSOs are not a substitute for government, but are central to sustainable governance.' Nowhere is this more true than in the search for sustainable peace. All the signs suggest that this programme is in tune with the times.

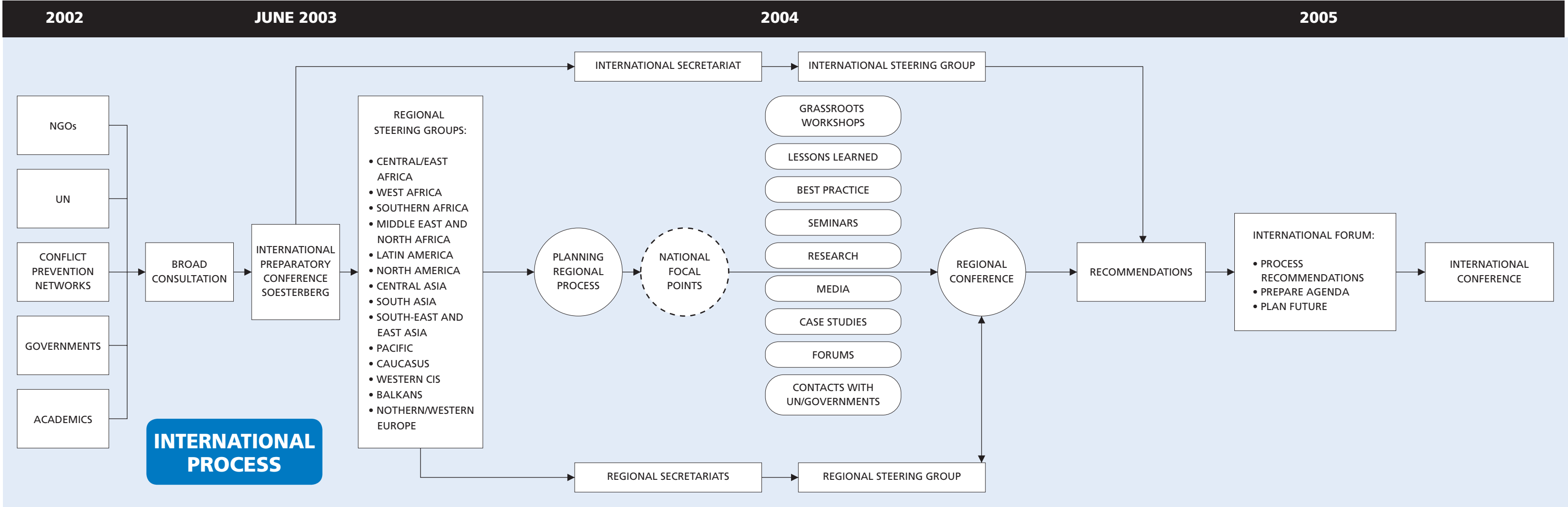
# International process

The overall objective of the Programme is to develop a common platform for effective action in conflict prevention from the community to the global level. For this platform to be genuinely global, it needs to be genuinely inclusive. This means that northern/western interests should not predominate and that international preoccupations should not drown the voice of the local community. The regional structure of the programme is designed to prevent such distortions.

The international dimension is also important. The original impulse came from the United Nations and we can assume that agreements made at the international level will increase the level of political commitment to conflict prevention and to the role of civil society within it. The International Steering Group (ISG), besides guarding the coherence and the integrity of the programme, will therefore establish links to other international initiatives, like the Human Security Network (which links thirteen governments from all regions at foreign minister level). It will also work closely with the NGO-UN Prevention Working Group in New York (Core Partnership for Action to Prevent Violent Conflict), which will liaise with the UN throughout the programme.

The composition of the ISG reflects this dual role. Each region active in the programme will be represented (by its Regional Initiator or mandated alternative), as will the NGO-UN Prevention Working Group and the international secretariat (ECCP). Representatives from international NGOs, from the UN and from some supportive governments will also be invited to attend. Regional Initiators are expected to submit their plans to the international secretariat, which will ensure that the overall programme retains its coherence and avoids unexpected pitfalls. Close contact within the ISG will be maintained via email and intranet. Three meetings are already scheduled.

Throughout the programme the international secretariat will advise and support the ongoing regional processes. It will co-ordinate funding applications and facilitate contact between regions. To ensure that the final International Agenda is well prepared, a work group has been set up to advise the ISG on possible formats. At the conclusion of the regional process, recommendations from the Regional Conferences will be sent to the ISG. If further discussion is needed, a special International Forum will be convened before the final Agenda is drafted.



- The **International Steering Group** will be made up of representatives from:

  - Regional Initiators (or mandated alternatives) (10-13)
  - The international secretariat and co-ordinator (ECCP)
  - Working group on Agendas for the Future
  - NGO-UN Prevention Working Group
  - The UN
  - Supportive governments
  - INGOs
  - The academic world
- Civil Society Actors**

  - Schools, colleges and youth movements
  - Academics
  - Women's organisations
  - Community groups
  - Elders and religious leaders
  - Development, Humanitarian and Human Rights organisations
  - Local peace practitioners
  - Civil peacebuilders
  - The media/artists/diaspora
  - The business community

- People building Peace II**

The programme will be celebrated in an authoritative book, published to coincide with the International Conference in New York. Chapters setting out the case for conflict prevention will be supported by case studies collected during the regional processes. The book will be available worldwide at an accessible price:

  - with inspiring stories of conflict prevention and peacebuilding at work
  - focussing on key issues: e.g. networking, campaigning, early warning, development and peacebuilding, traditional methods of conflict resolution etc.
  - raising the profile and status of civil society initiatives, especially on the local level
  - formulating the roles of the key actors and sectors
  - demonstrating the global potential of conflict prevention.

*Definitions of 'conflict prevention' and 'civil society' were discussed at Soesterberg but no final decisions were taken. Given the regional variations, it may not be necessary or even desirable to define these terms too closely. The dangers of too loose a definition (an incoherent programme) would seem to be balanced by the dangers of too tight a definition (an inflexible programme). Not forgetting, of course, the dangers of becoming preoccupied by definitions (a paralysed programme)! If the issue raises practical difficulties, Regional Initiators are invited to take it up with the ISG.*

# Regional process

The regional process is the heart of the programme. It is designed to ensure that all those working in conflict prevention, wherever they may be in the world, have a chance to contribute to the future development of the field. Within a broad framework necessary to preserve the coherence of the global initiative, each region is free to organise its own process in the most appropriate way. One outcome is defined - a Regional Conference in 2004 that will put forward recommendations for the International Conference at UN Headquarters. But others, such as a Regional Agenda for the coming decade, will be up to each region to frame.

## Linkage

At the same time, regions can learn from each other as the process evolves, either directly or via the International Steering Group (ISG) and its secretariat. To preserve balance and coherence, the ISG will ensure that the various regional processes are on roughly the same scale and that certain broad themes are addressed. As specific issues emerge as important, the international secretariat will commission papers from specialists and feed them back into regional discussions (they could be, for example, on women and peacebuilding, or on codes of conduct). Regions will also be able to link their discussions via websites and email, making the regional process part of an international dialogue.

## Planning

Broadly speaking, a Regional Initiator will launch and co-ordinate the programme in each region (for criteria see p. 13). The Initiator's tasks (after consulting with key regional and national NGOs, academics, UN agencies and perhaps governments) are:

- to set up a representative Regional Steering Group (RSG).
- to establish a secretariat
- to estimate budgets
- to draw up funding proposals

The RSG/secretariat will then:

- organise a regional programme of research and discussion that will raise the key issues and include the relevant actors in the region (either on a regional basis or via national focal points).
- raise funding for the regional process, in collaboration with the international secretariat.
- keep in touch with the international programme via the ISG/secretariat, which is available for advice and support as required.
- organise the Regional Conference
- prepare a Regional Agenda for the next decade
- draft a set of recommendations for the International Conference at UN Headquarters.

## Flexibility

It is important to stress again that the various regions are currently at different stages in the process. Some have already mandated a Regional Initiator, while others are still busy consulting. In some cases the role may be shared between more than one organisation. Regional flexibility is the rule.



Each region can explore its own issues and priorities, as well as pursuing the general themes that emerge via the ISG. Regions are encouraged to involve all the relevant sectors and to ensure that grassroots practitioners play a major role in discussion. One common element of the programme is the request to collect case studies of conflict prevention in action. These stories from all over the world will be worked into a compelling book and presented at the final conference at UN Headquarters.

### **Message**

The regional processes provide a unique opportunity to spread the message that conflict prevention works across the world. Through the contacts made and the activities generated, they will naturally build a coalition of partners for the future. To broaden the base of this support, an awareness-raising campaign is also being planned. In the first phase (2003) lobby documents will be prepared. In a second phase (2004) policy makers and the informed public will be approached. By the time the International Conference takes place (2005) the potential of conflict prevention should be more widely and more deeply understood.

#### *Example 1: South Asia*

The Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS) in Sri Lanka already had a regional mandate to support NGOs on conflict prevention issues and was thus a natural choice for Regional Initiator. National convenors have been identified for two countries (Pakistan and India) and others are being sought. A brainstorm session is scheduled to assess the research needs of the programme and six national conferences are planned (Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India (2), Nepal, Bangla Desh) prior to the concluding Regional Conference. The programme is seen in South Asia as an opportunity:

- to develop local capacity for conflict prevention
- to develop a lobby tool towards governments and international organisations
- to strengthen co-operation amongst civil society actors with regard to conflict prevention
- to develop a sound conceptual framework regarding the role of civil society in conflict prevention
- to involve the media in activities designed to get the message across

#### *Example 2: Latin America and the Caribbean*

Meetings are planned for 2003 in four sub regions: Southern cone and Brazil, Andes Region, Central America and Mexico, and Greater Caribbean, leading up to a larger gathering in Mexico at the end of the year. The RSG will form in the course of the year. At present the emphasis is on making the process as broad and inclusive as possible.

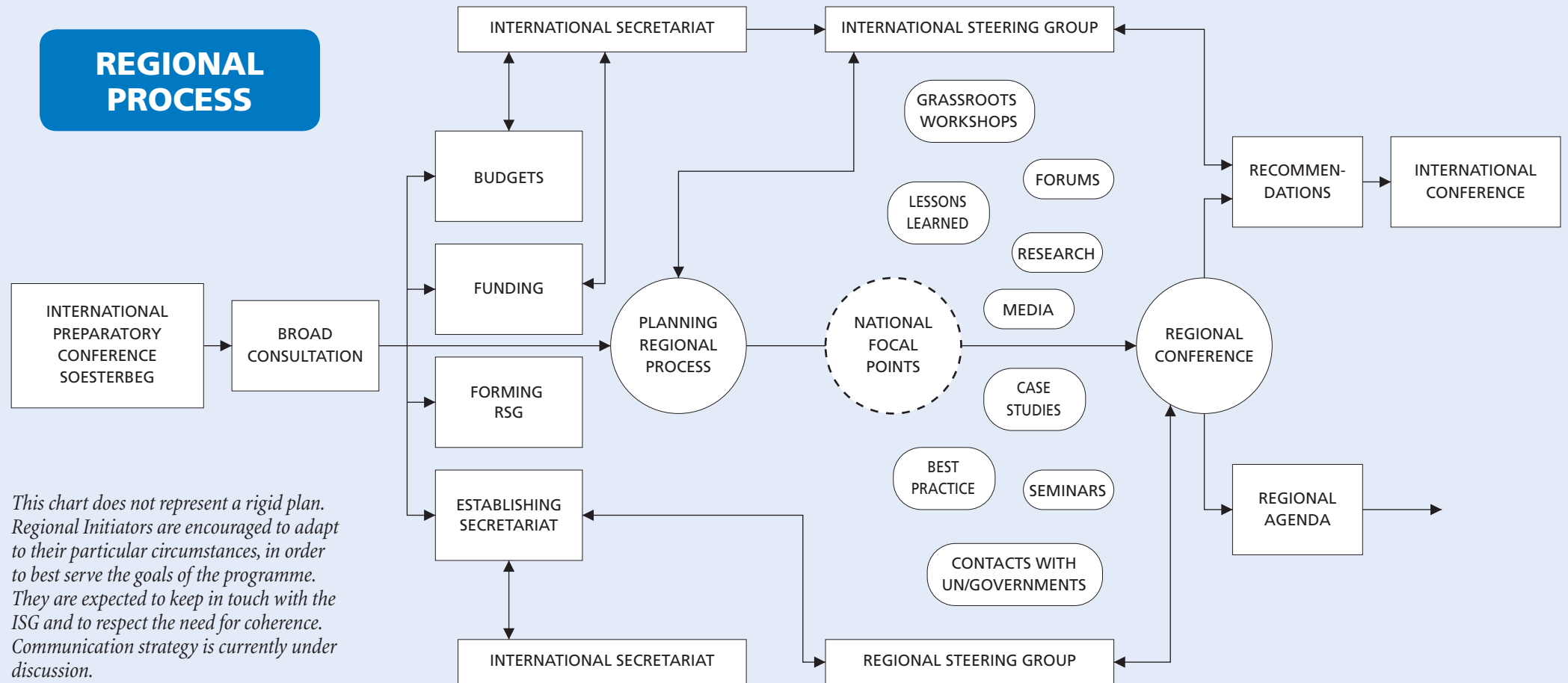
#### *Example 3: Western and Northern Europe*

The European Regional Conference will be held in Dublin to coincide with Irish Presidency of the EU. It will be jointly run by the ECCP and the Irish government, whose involvement is particularly welcomed as a bridge between civil society and government cultures.

#### *Example 4: Central and East Africa*

Three African sub-regions worked closely with the ECCP in the consultation phase that preceded the programme. In East Africa a group of national, regional and continental organisations met in March 2003 and selected the Nairobi Peace Initiative-Africa (NPI-Africa) as Regional Initiator for Central and East Africa, including the Horn and the Great Lakes. In the Horn they will be supported by the Inter Africa Group, based in Addis Ababa. A similar partner for the Great Lakes has yet to be confirmed.

## REGIONAL PROCESS



### Possible themes

- Early warning: early response
- Advocacy and lobby
- Relations with the UN/UN agencies/governments
- Evaluation and best practise
- Code of Conduct
- Traditional conflict resolution techniques
- Reconciliation
- The role of the media
- Ground-up capacity building/training
- Post 9/11

### Main issues

- The role of civil society in conflict prevention and peacebuilding
- Development and peacebuilding
- Interaction with governments, regional organisation and UN agencies
- Networking

### Regional Steering Groups

- should include representatives from:
- The Regional Initiator/secretariat
  - National focal points or equivalent
  - Regional conflict prevention NGOs/networks
- plus others such as:
- academics
  - practitioners
  - UN agency field offices
  - NGOs working in related fields (human rights, development etc.)

### Regional Initiators

- are generally organisations that:
- are active in conflict prevention and peacebuilding
  - are already part of a regional network
  - are engaged with local, national and international actors
  - have a regional focus
  - have sufficient organisational capacity and experience

# Benefits

After all the workshops, seminars, national and Regional Conferences, the Regional Agendas, the book of case studies and the final International Conference, the global conflict prevention community will have made significant progress in the following related areas:

## Clarification

- of the role and responsibility of civil society actors in preventing armed conflict
- of the role and responsibility of civil society actors in building peace
- of the roles and competencies of the different sectors involved in conflict prevention
- of the value of civil society actors to governments seeking to prevent conflict
- of relations between civil society actors and the UN and its agencies
- of relations between conflict prevention NGOs and other related NGOs active in conflict areas
- of relations between civil society actors and governments

## Effectiveness

- via the creation of mechanisms for interaction on peace and security between civil society actors, national governments, regional organisations and the UN and its agencies
- via reduction of duplication and competition between civil society actors
- via reduction of competition between civil society actors and governments
- via the development of conflict prevention networks at the local, national, regional and international levels
- via the development of the theoretical basis of conflict prevention methods
- via increased government acceptance of the unique value of civil society actors in preventing local and internal conflicts (e.g. early warning, reconciliation)

## Promotion

- through increased UN awareness of the role of civil society actors in conflict prevention
- through increased government awareness of the role of civil society actors in conflict prevention
- through increased donor awareness of the crucial importance of sustained civil society involvement in conflict prevention
- through the raised profile of conflict prevention practitioners from the grassroots to the international level
- through increased public awareness of the potential of conflict prevention

# Regional initiators

## Central and East Africa

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# International Steering Group

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## Funding

### *International process:*

We are very grateful to the governments of Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands, and to CORDAID and World Vision, who have funded the preparatory phase of this project. Decisions on funding the ongoing international process have still to be taken.

### *Regional process:*

Funding for the regional process will be raised by each region, in collaboration with the international secretariat. This will ensure that regional budgets remain roughly in line and that applications do not all go to the same donors.



## Why now?

‘We, the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind...’ The familiar opening words of the UN Charter, framed by the victorious allies at the end of the Second World War, echo strangely through the UN Millennium Declaration, signed by 147 heads of state and adopted by 191 nations in September 2000: ‘We, the heads of state and government... will spare no effort to free our peoples from the scourge of war, whether within or between states, which has claimed more than five million lives in the past decade.’

Over the first half century of the United Nations existence, the scourge of war proved very difficult to quell. Existing mechanisms were exposed as inadequate. We avoided nuclear annihilation, but the Cold War spawned terribly destructive conflicts in the world’s poorest regions. The New World Order envisaged after the collapse of the Soviet Union rapidly dissolved into a series of brutal civil wars in which, as our leaders admit, millions were killed and millions more displaced. Nations, driven by short-term pressures, usually reacted too late. The cost, in human misery and squandered resources, was vast. The scars will take generations to heal.

‘The international community’, embodied by the UN, too often proved ineffective when faced with the harshest realities. A new vision was required and began to emerge in the last decade of the twentieth century. The UN Secretary-General spoke of the need to shift from a Culture of Reaction to a Culture of Prevention. The EU and the G8 took up the call. A new discipline developed – conflict prevention – that set out to integrate the efforts of all those working for peace. Community leaders, women’s groups, journalists and businessmen demonstrated that their influence could sometimes extend beyond that of soldiers and diplomats. Political leaders across the world became increasingly aware of civil society’s potential to anticipate and resolve its own tensions. Academics began to give theoretical shape to methods developed ad hoc on the ground. Networks of NGOs and practitioners began to form. Experience was pooled. Lessons were learned.

The terrorist attacks on the United States and the subsequent US response appear to have ushered in a new era. Not the New World Order envisaged at the start of the 1990’s, but an era apparently dominated by international divisions, by ideological forces independent of states, and by the unprecedented power of one nation. We have no idea how this era will develop. However, we can be absolutely certain that the myriad of conflicts that divide communities in all parts of the world and which stem from poverty, ethnic tensions, corrupt and incompetent government, social exclusion and scarce resources, will not go away. Any of them could explode into armed confrontation, with incalculable consequences.

Conflict will always be with us. But if humanity is not to be further shamed by an endless series of futile, destructive wars, we will have to learn when and how to prevent tension escalating into violence (90% of the victims of today’s conflicts are civilians). It is a very long-term commitment, not a task to be accomplished in a couple of decades. Nor is it glamorous. Averted conflicts do not make the headlines. All the more important, then, that high-profile events do not monopolise the attention of policy makers. If world leaders are serious about their commitment to the Millennium Declaration, they need to put far more of their energy and resources into building capacity for peace.

Peace cannot be imposed by states, nor can it be imposed by any use of force. It has to take root. And while final responsibility for preventing war and building peace may lie with states, it is now widely accepted that civil society has a major role to play in the process. Conflict prevention is a young field. It is a broad inclusive field, covering all sectors, involving state and non-state actors. It is highly fragmented and hard to co-ordinate. But never before have we been able to communicate with each other so easily. The potential for co-operation is enormous. To realise this potential we need to build on the first decade of conflict prevention experience, to develop reliable mechanisms for working together and to define the responsibilities and competencies of the different sectors. Difficult issues of demarcation need to be faced. The programme described in this brochure is a major step in this direction. It demands your active support.