

Chapter 8: Multilateralism and the International Order

A way of thinking and acting

208 The challenges of global violence and hatred are by no means new to governments and the international community. One of the core insights provided by its work is that one-sided imposed solutions have tended to fail in carrying hearts and minds, and that therefore such approaches are unlikely to be effective or credible.

209 The task is to arrive at an approach or style of engagement that is effective and credible precisely because the measures required can be sustained over a long period. Credibility accrues from having to build and nurture coalitions of interest, having to take into account the opinions of others, having to keep open lines of communication, and from affording respect to those of different views and values. The issue of effectiveness requires asking the simple question: does an intervention that is unilaterally imposed actually work in achieving its stated goals?

210 We have focused very heavily in this report on the need for more economically advanced countries to deal respectfully and with understanding in their relationships with other states, but it is important to point out that this is a two-way process. It is also the case that poorer countries must deal fairly with the more economically advanced countries. There are some leaders who dismiss all efforts by new leaders in these economically advanced countries to change and improve relationships. They wish to hold the new generation to account in perpetuity for all the misdeeds of history. Such snubs and rebuffs to those in the less economically advanced world who do wish to build respect and understanding is likely to be very counter-productive for all concerned. Respect and understanding is a process of mutuality.

211 These then are some of the hallmarks of a positive and constructive multilateral approach. They have substantial value in helping governments and others to address grievance and humiliation in order to curb violence and hatred. The Commonwealth itself is deeply imbued with this approach and its underlying philosophy of engagement. And, indeed, the Commission itself has carried out its task at the behest of a multilateral organisation. This necessarily implies a particular way of looking at, and thinking about, problems and arriving at better, shared solutions.

Multilateralism and unilateralism

212 Acting multilaterally has many advantages and these should be recalled at the outset:

- Multilateralism amounts to a way of looking at things in a rounded and balanced manner, with a sensitivity to the true complexities of the international problems faced by countries today.

- More often than not, the international order is more effectively served by, and geared to, this approach than to Big Power politics. Few, if any, powerful countries can act to preserve their interests alone. Even Big Powers implicitly, and explicitly through their membership of international organisations like the UN and Commonwealth and accession to international instruments, accept the case for working with others to secure their own interests and international order.
- The complexity of many current and emerging international issues is suited to a multilateral approach. This is because many of these issues embody the collective interests and responsibilities of all countries or of a group. Examples might be neighbours sharing a common resource or affected by a particular event, or facing a common environmental challenge, or a disparate group with a common interest such as economic vulnerability.

213 The Commission recognises that there may be situations in which unilateral action may be required and is permissible under international law, for example, self defence or in defence of a nation's citizens. However, even in cases where unilateral intervention has been required, or has taken place, it is striking to observe in many cases that there was a continuing need for multilateral tools to promote dialogue and afford dignity in reaching a solution. The latter may become small yet essential tests of the willingness of the powerful to engage with, and respond positively to, the interests and perspectives of the less powerful. There is a need to find answers which address the concerns and hopes of all parties, and this means that any approach where one side has a 'winner takes all' attitude is unlikely to be credible or effective.

214 The Commonwealth approach of dialogue and consensus building, in which even the least powerful member must be fully consulted, is an important example of this inherently multilateral approach. And as all members use the English language, communication can be both more efficient and more informal. As a result, the Commonwealth can use the power of language as a mechanism for protecting not only civil liberties, but also cultural rights.

215 South Africa stands out as perhaps the most striking example of the Commonwealth approach in action. Even when the country withdrew from the organisation in the early 1960s, the Commonwealth, rather than forsaking South Africa, made it a centrepiece of its activity. First it set out the position of principle, clearly defined in the condemnation of Apartheid and racism in the 1971 Singapore Principles. Then it moved to concrete actions such as sporting and economic sanctions, grappling with differences between member states in finding a broadly supported approach. At the same time it pushed the boundaries for engagement, highlighted by the 1985 Eminent Persons Group mission to South Africa. Then in the early 1990s it supported the internal negotiating process which led in 1994 to a free multi-racial South Africa and its return not only to Commonwealth membership, but Commonwealth leadership, with its hosting of the 1999 Durban CHOGM.

- 216 In the course of this, South Africa itself has become something of a model for a 'rainbow nation', with mechanisms to address past grievance and some of the strongest protections of individual and community rights in the world.
- 217 More recently, in the last decade in Nigeria and Sierra Leone the Commonwealth rallied round to support the people of these nations as they faced up to military dictatorships. In the case of Sierra Leone, members co-operated with military as well as political support to see the legitimate government of President Kabbah returned. But in both cases, the crucial Commonwealth role came in the peace-building phase which followed democratic elections, when they worked with a wide range of international partners to support these members as they reclaimed civil government and grappled with the roots of past grievances. In both countries the Commonwealth-supported efforts continue.
- 218 These are familiar and credible examples of the multilateralist approach at work and bringing about concrete results. The outcomes have delivered benefits to all sides. And this is where the approach has direct relevance for today's conflicts. In some countries the approach has yielded greater freedoms for legitimate opposition parties and movements. In others, it has allowed greater inclusion of marginalised groups into the mainstream of society. And in yet others, it has spawned realistic and holistic strategies to combat terror.
- 219 It is this philosophy which also stands behind the Secretary-General's Good Offices work, to address potential causes of conflict and involve all parties in sustainable political and social solutions. In member nations as diverse as Guyana, Cameroon, Swaziland and Maldives these efforts have had considerable success and have been much appreciated by member governments. The Commission commends these Good Offices activities of the Commonwealth and the philosophy which inspires them as having a wide relevance for addressing grievance internationally, and acting as a model of multilateral support in support of the challenges faced by nations.

Late, though not lost, opportunities

- 220 It must be acknowledged that this approach, slow and consultative by nature, is not always immediately successful. Zimbabwe, which has withdrawn from the Commonwealth, is a case in point. In Zimbabwe, the absence of a viable political solution acceptable to all sides that also addresses longstanding grievances, as well as a failure to meet Commonwealth concerns and expectations, remains a major concern. But this absence should not be taken to infer that such an outcome cannot yet be attained by the use of a Commonwealth, multilateralist approach. The South African case gives hope for a way forward. By going with the grain of the approach outlined here, the Commission desperately hopes that a successful outcome in Zimbabwe remains within reach. The current situation is a cruel and unnecessary tragedy for the people of Zimbabwe.

221 This approach may also have something to offer in the current vexed context of Iraq, where there are growing calls for greater multilateral engagement. It can be argued that the escalation of violence in Iraq under occupation following recent elections illustrates the penalties of a singular concentration on voting (the illusion that 'if there are elections we have a functioning democracy'), since democratic political processes often require public discussion, including addressing new divisions as well as the history of past tensions and conflicts. There is a great need to ensure a political and security climate in which public discussion without barriers of community divisions can proceed. The international community needs to help promote this public discussion.

222 Afghanistan's difficulties also represent a late, though not lost, opportunity for multilateralism, especially given the political commitment of the United Nations. The Afghan people underwent untold suffering over several decades of armed conflict, which was triggered by the invasion of Afghanistan by foreign troops. The Geneva Accords, signed in 1988, entrusted the UN with a monitoring role and the expectation that Afghanistan would thus be restored to its people, and a multi-ethnic democracy would be set up. This expectation remains unrealised, as externally supported inter-ethnic conflict prevents the restoration of peace and the return home of large numbers of refugees and displaced persons. Afghanistan has in effect become an abandoned state. The UN Strategic Framework for Afghanistan statement prepared in September 1998 described the desperate reality of Afghanistan thus:

'It mixes a volatile and violent political crisis, a human rights and humanitarian emergency, and two decades of missed development opportunities. The fragmentation of the country and the collapse of practically all institutions of the State, also constitute "an emergency of governance".'^{xxv}

223 The Commission believes that a multilateralist approach remains the most credible way forward. The 2001 Bonn Agreement contained the following core elements of a strategy to rescue and rebuild Afghanistan:

- A process to be nurtured and facilitated by the UN which would involve all segments of the Afghan population and enable them to participate in the implementation of the framework and basis of lasting peace in Afghanistan.
- A process of meaningful consultations to be sustained with all segments of the Afghan people in all parts of Afghanistan and those displaced outside the country.
- The basic elements of the framework were: (a) recognition of the right to choose freely a broad-based, multi-ethnic and fully representative government consisting of representatives of all segments of the Afghan people; (b) an inclusive participatory process which would involve continuing consultations to spell out each phase of the transition and clearly formulated steps to be taken in each phase; (c) while this transition was being affected within the agreed framework, the international

community would commit the needed resources to support the process of reconstruction and in particular to the strategic goal of building capacity for providing national security.

224 The Commission believes that strong international engagement will continue to be required to address the remaining challenges. Unemployment, the large-scale revival of poppy cultivation, and the increasing insurgency of the Taliban are matters of grave concern. Therefore, a meaningful contribution can be made towards truly restoring Afghanistan to all of its peoples. This involves a resumption of the Commonwealth approach by the international community in order to reinstate genuine stability and democracy through development and the participation of people affected by violence and fragmentation. Respect and understanding among all the segments of the Afghan population must provide the foundation for a multi-ethnic and stable democracy.

225 Similar approaches and conclusions can be applied to other outstanding conflicts and trouble-spots within and beyond the Commonwealth:

- Combating extremism and terrorism requires governments to go beyond security and intelligence measures. Sustained solutions are most likely through multilateral co-operation to isolate and deplete support for extremist ideologies of hatred and fear.
- Unilateral military interventions, sometimes guided by humanitarian motives, are nevertheless dependent on securing political settlements rapidly in their wake. Failure to arrive at such a settlement risks returning to earlier cycles of violence and even escalation with greater turmoil and suffering.
- Long-standing opponents have, in some cases, been able to liberate themselves from a winner-takes-all mindset. Multilateralist thinking has been critical in doing so. In Northern Ireland, a peace dividend now combines with a security dividend with benefits for all.

Respect and understanding have to be carried to issues of injustice and the international order

226 At any moment in history, there are grievances that have to do with the perceived unfairness of the world system and the unjustly strident behaviour of powerful countries or blocs. The reasons for sentiments of injustice depend to a great extent on historical circumstance and the balance of power in that particular period – thus grievances experienced by people and countries during the Cold War have different geneses than grievances experienced today.

227 As with local-level conflicts conducted through the lens of identities, there is an initial tendency to explain feelings of global injustice primarily in economic terms. Some have argued that it is the lack of economic integration of Southern economies into the neo-liberal global economic system, which is the cause of social dislocation, and that the economic hegemony of Western countries has provoked Islamic militancy.

228 There is some basic logic in this argument. The extensive restructuring of the world system of production and division of labour during the past 20 years has generated unprecedented benefits for some regions, countries and individuals. However, the effects are highly uneven, including within countries.

229 Poorer countries have borne the brunt of demographic pressures. Migration, predominantly of young people, is one example. It is estimated that in 2005 there were over 191 million international migrants worldwide,^{xxvi} the majority from developing countries. This has had a major negative impact on the skills base of developing countries. At the same time, in the receiving countries it tends to increase competition between disadvantaged groups as they struggle for jobs, housing and services. But more positively it has enormously increased the diversity of peoples in developed countries. Furthermore, remittances to developing countries as a result have contributed significantly to their capital inflows and community development. Although the persistence of high levels of poverty and unequal participation in international decision-making processes create a sense of being 'left behind' in the broad sweep of globalisation, there are also other factors operating.

The stark problem of double standards

230 The Commission concludes that a more significant issue – and one of the underlying causes of a deep sense of injustice in the world today – is not the economic hegemony of (largely) Western industrialised nations per se, but rather, the perception that some of these nations have created an environment where there are no rules based on international law, only national self-interest. This, then, plays into the hands of extremist groups with a grievance agenda:

'Organisations that employ terror have gained legitimacy by the often cynical, hypocritical and abusive exercise of power in the international realm by today's most developed democracies. Preaching the protection of rights at home, the military and intelligence organisations of the great powers have too often supported abusive regimes abroad if in doing so they gain strategic military advantage or access to natural resources'.^{xxvii}

231 Instances of nations acting in this manner have long historical roots. Throughout the colonial period and during the Cold War, both Western governments and the Soviet Union supported proxy wars in third countries, particularly in Africa, Latin America and South-East Asia. Taking advantage of local grievances and conflict but often funded by outsiders, these wars subverted people's democratic rights and had devastating effects on the lives of all those caught up in them.

xxvi UN DESA 2005, 1.

xxvii Putzel 2005, 5.

- 232 Although the incidence of proxy wars has decreased since the end of the Cold War, the involvement of rich countries in armed conflicts in third states continues through the export of arms. Of the total exports of conventional arms in the world in 2006, as much as 79 per cent was sold by the five permanent members of the Security Council, and 80 per cent by the G8 countries, with many countries common to both lists.^{xxviii}
- 233 If the average spent on arms every year had been put to the service of education and health in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, it is estimated that every child could be in school and child mortality could be reduced by two-thirds – fulfilling two of the MDGs by 2015. Responsibility for the ‘opportunity cost’ of arms is that of buying countries, but also of the G8 nations.
- 234 In recent years, the perception of injustice and a failure to protect human rights in the conflict in the Middle East generally, and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in particular, has been felt most acutely in the context of international law and the protection of human rights. The UN ‘Alliance of Civilizations’ report sees the Palestine issue as a major factor in the widening rift between Muslim-majority and Western societies. It identifies this as a – if not the – priority issue for resolution.
- 235 Although it is extremely difficult to attribute causality to the approach of some Western countries to particular conflicts, researchers consistently identify the prolonged Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the invasion of Iraq, and the continued presence of Western military forces there as important factors in the radicalisation of young Muslims, particularly those in Western countries. The Commission believes this needs to be addressed – and dialogue and consistency in action which conforms to agreed international standards is an important means of beginning to achieve this.

Engagement with and through international institutions, in itself, confers respect

- 236 A different sort of impunity occurs when powerful countries refuse to ratify, or, having ratified, refuse to honour, UN and other international agreements and treaties. Many countries are slow to follow through on their international commitments due to capacity constraints as well as for political reasons. There is, therefore, a pressing need for the world’s most powerful countries and oldest democracies to show demonstrated commitment to this process.
- 237 The controversy over the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib has raised questions about respect for international law. The Commission believes that such incidents weaken the moral authority of the world’s most economically advanced countries. Some argue it gives organisations advocating terror the opportunity to

operate from what may be seen as the moral high ground, though in fact organisations that are committed to violence and extremism have forfeited the real moral high ground. The Commission observes that the outcomes are deeply damaging for Western developed countries and can permit terrorist and extremist organisations and groups bent on hatred and violence to gain tactical advantage in shaping hearts and minds.

Devaluing the currency of respect and understanding

238 A sense of injustice and unilateral invulnerability can have long-term consequences, particularly when they arise from actions which are undertaken by the world's most developed democracies. The effects of these actions are to erode trust between countries in various ways:

- They can create a precedent of rule-breaking that may be hard to contain.
- They may reduce support from other countries that no longer trust their integrity.
- There is evidence that they allow radical elements to gain legitimacy amongst a wider public.

239 If the world's developed democracies are seen to abuse their power, opt out of international agreements (such as on the environment), or act solely in their own perceived interests, it is possible that others will follow their lead. Individuals and groups must have a reason to trust in international systems of governance and see them as applying equally to all nations.

240 There is, in addition, a pressing need to respect decisions made by the people when they have been consulted in a credible way. Big power states are wrong-footed when they do not accept the decisions of the people as expressed through democratic elections. A particularly challenging case is one outside the Commonwealth – in Palestine. There, after demanding that all parties and groups submit to the democratic process, most Western governments refused to accept the electoral outcome. There is on the one hand, the need for all countries including the world leaders to accept the outcomes of free and fair elections, no matter where they occur, and also on the other hand, the need for elected parties to abide by the requirements of democratic processes, including respecting rights of other parties, media and open public discussion.

Respect and understanding to underpin change is embodied in Commonwealth membership as well

241 When countries have been suspended from the Commonwealth, it has normally been because they have been unable to honour the Commonwealth principle of dialogue and participatory freedom with regard to their own people. Thus suspension has been incurred where the military has overthrown democratically elected governments or where there have been serious or persistent violations of Commonwealth values.

242 But, significantly, it is not the Commonwealth approach to cut connections completely or to ask member countries to leave the Commonwealth family; when members leave it is normally their leaders' decision, as was the case with Zimbabwe. This is particularly tragic given the effort expended by the Commonwealth in supporting the people of Zimbabwe to achieve their freedom from the Rhodesian regime.

243 As is often the case in human relations, those who have been abused can become the abusers. The terrible violence being done to the opposition and many ordinary people in the country today, shows no respect for common humanity, the rule of law, or even self-interested economics. It is our belief that this is not because the Commonwealth way of working has failed, but rather that it has not been tried over the years with enough persuasion and persistence. The Commission acknowledges that efforts with regard to Zimbabwe continue, and must be strengthened.

Showing respect to regional neighbours reflects and reinforces multilateralist thinking

244 Deep feelings of disrespect and humiliation sometimes emanate from a feeling of how 'one's people' are being treated in other countries by other peoples and by other governments. In short, kith-and-kinship identity can become both regionalised and globalised. In searching for ways to re-engage feelings of respect and understanding at a local level, the Commission believes there is also need to understand this wider sense of injustice – to understand why it occurs and how it can be addressed.

245 True regional co-operation needs to be based on sentiments of respect and understanding between nations in the region, whatever the size of their economy or their political influence. A partnership approach is one outcome. Greater understanding between partners who take different views is another.

246 Small, landlocked countries are particularly reliant on relations with larger neighbours, as are small island states on the development of good regional networks and sound policies that benefit them all. Island states tend to have certain vulnerabilities in common: to environmental disasters, to the consequences of climate change, to the international trade system, and to public health issues, including HIV/AIDS. Sometimes they have the added difficulty of communicating within and between countries because of distance (the collections of islands that make up Kiribati stretch over 3,500km).

247 These factors mean that these small island states must develop partnerships, based on trust, for developing shared beneficial strategies, pooling their human and financial resources and establishing priorities. They have a lot to gain from close dialogue and co-operation with each other and with their larger neighbours.

- 248 Regional grievances are most likely to arise as a result of economically and politically dominant countries behaving in a way that makes smaller countries feel like periphery states. This can occur whenever there is a considerable discrepancy in scale. In the Pacific region, Australia and New Zealand are the strongest nations in terms of economic status and also the largest donors to other Pacific Islands. For the Caribbean the US is the dominant regional power.
- 249 Powerful countries need to be continually aware that there are thoughtful and respectful ways to conduct affairs with smaller neighbours. They also need to be motivated to act in accordance with their awareness. Principles of respect need to underlie all relationships, not just high-level ones between governments, but between the whole range of institutional and individual contacts that citizens and youth groups have with each other. Finally, and importantly, it means seeing small states as homelands to people, cultures and perspectives – and not primarily as potential problems, for example, as havens for terrorists.
- 250 Small states are integral to the Commonwealth's identity: as a diverse group of nations, 32 of its 53 member countries are small states, most of them with populations of less than 1.5 million. Small states are making determined efforts to pursue sustainable growth and devise coherent strategies for integrating their economies with the larger trading blocs and with new trading systems. The Commonwealth is supporting small states in these endeavours and is an excellent forum to emphasise the importance of all countries being treated with respect and as equals, regardless of the size of their economy, their population or their influence on world affairs.