



The role of the Organization of American States in conflict-affected states in the Americas

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Yadira Soto

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International IDEA
Strömsborg
SE-103 34, STOCKHOLM
SWEDEN
Tel: +46 8 698 37 00, fax: +46 8 20 24 22
Email: info@idea.int, website: www.idea.int

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CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	4
2. THE REGIONAL CONTEXT	6
3. STRENGTHENING THE OAS FRAMEWORK FOR PEACEBUILDING AND CONFLICT PREVENTION	8
4. INSTITUTIONALIZING DIALOGUE IN THE AMERICAS	11
5. THE PRO PAZ PROGRAMME IN GUATEMALA	13
6. FUTURE ROLES FOR THE OAS IN CONFLICT PREVENTION AND PEACEBUILDING	19
7. CONCLUSIONS	23
REFERENCES	25
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	27

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the Organization of American States (OAS) has accumulated a wealth of experience in post-conflict peacebuilding, dialogue promotion and conflict resolution, providing, in turn, invaluable lessons for strengthening democratic systems of governance. Indeed, at the onset of the post-conflict period (the early 1990s), the newly democratic countries in the region recognized the important role that multilateral organizations like the OAS can play in rebuilding institutions, consolidating democracy and establishing dialogue between civil society and government actors.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the OAS's commitment to democracy led the organization to assist countries such as Guatemala, Haiti, Nicaragua and Suriname, all of which were undergoing important political processes in the area of post-conflict reconciliation, reconstruction and democratic consolidation. These countries provided the organization with excellent testing grounds, which allowed the OAS to gain an understanding of the structural sources of conflict. They thus enabled the OAS to analyse the links between, and importance of, operational conflict prevention and democratic development, human security, environmental sustainability and economic development. It was not until the early 2000s, however, when a larger group of countries began confronting a series of low-intensity socio-political conflicts and tensions, which adversely affected their systems of governance, that member states welcomed a more active role for the OAS in conflict prevention and in strengthening their own institutional capacity to respond to these complex situations.

The OAS's experience in peacebuilding and dialogue promotion has primarily taken place within a broader institutional framework of democratic consolidation and peaceful resolution of disputes, respect for human rights and security. A key question posed in this Discussion Paper is whether the mechanisms and mandates that the OAS undertook in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction allowed for state-building and democracy support in tandem with the organization's intervention. This paper asserts that the post-conflict peacebuilding work the organization undertook in the 1990s allowed it to work both horizontally and vertically across the region, making it possible to improve understandings of the correlation between democratic development, preventive diplomacy and operational conflict, therefore contributing to expanding the organization's capacity to work in conflict prevention in a strategic manner.

The paper argues that regional organizations like the OAS—given their privileged institutional positioning, convening power and strong normative frameworks—should continue to play a more active role in peaceful resolution of conflict. Current threats and challenges to peace and security in the Americas continue to test the democratic gains of recent decades, while also posing a new dilemma: how can regional organizations develop a more inclusive framework of action that links political actions in preventive

diplomacy with democratic and institutional strengthening in order to manage and mitigate conflict peacefully and equitably?

To explore this question, the paper will first provide a brief overview of the context in the Americas and the common challenges facing what is a diverse and unequal region. Next, it will outline the organization's commitment to democracy and security, as enshrined in the successive mandates and mechanisms the organization has long established, including the most recent, most holistic instrument, the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

The paper establishes that while the changing nature of conflicts and tensions has evolved over the last 20 years, the work of the organization in democratic strengthening and the application of the Charter today underscores the value of the OAS working in a region whose political context is constantly changing. Next, the paper will explore how, with the peacebuilding experience gained beforehand, the organization was able to institutionalize dialogue more broadly and incorporate it as an integral part of its work in democratic assistance in the region. To demonstrate this process, the paper will present the case of the Pro Paz programme in Guatemala, a multi-layered and cross-cutting peacebuilding programme that incorporated dialogue to engage a variety of actors in civil society and government, including several marginalized constituencies.

2. THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

The Americas are a diverse region, whose various countries' realities are shaped by their different states of democratic and economic development. Nonetheless, important commonalities span the entire region, turning seemingly disparate realities into shared challenges. To different extents, then, these challenges have affected every single democratization and peacebuilding effort undertaken by the OAS.

First, the wave of democratization that has taken place over the past 25 years resulted in the establishment of legalistic democratic frameworks, institutions and regular, general, free, fair and transparent elections. The OAS recognizes that substantial work is needed in many countries to embed democracy and democratic values in political discourse and practice and in turn to strengthen democratic governance by fostering sound public policies, transparency, accountability, equality and opportunity.

Second, since the end of the Cold War, the diversity of interests in the Americas has broadened. Indeed, evidence of this is the array of intraregional, strategic, political and economic interests and alliances among OAS member states. This divergence, although understandable given the different histories, political and legal systems, economic paths, international affiliations, degrees of hemispheric isolation, etc., makes consensus-building difficult on many different levels depending on the issue at hand. It is clear, for example, that security challenges vary from country to country and between subregions. Yet, at the same time, issues of transnational security might be better addressed if governments worked towards a shared policy on how to tackle the underlying causes of insecurity, thereby strengthening the capacity of governments to mitigate security-related conflicts.

Third, the success of electoral democracy in the last 20 years and increasingly broad civic participation in democratic processes have also elevated a full spectrum of interests at the regional level. The dynamics emerging from their interplay has created opportunities as well as challenges for the OAS and its member states.

Fourth, despite the recent economic progress of many OAS member states, the region remains the world's most unequal in terms of income and social mobility. Millions of people, mostly women and children, still live in poverty, and survive on USD 1 or less per day.¹ Many more continue to bear the burden of social exclusion and discrimination, in addition to the other problems the hemisphere as a whole is facing, including drug trafficking, organized crime, HIV/AIDS and natural disasters. These are all clear policy failures that point to the incompleteness and exclusiveness of political actions and policies.

¹ According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC n.d.), in 2013 approximately 170 million people in Latin America (28.1 percent of the population) were living in poverty.

Fifth, in each country in the Americas, young people make up more than 50 per cent of the population (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean n.d.). They represent the key for social and economic development and prosperity. However, political processes continue to alienate and exclude youth in many countries, leaving them despondent and frustrated with their role in society, and many have lost confidence in the political process and in basic state institutions. Indeed, many are increasingly demanding more education, training and political opportunities through both conventional and unconventional means (take, for instance, the rise of social media and its impact on Brazil's 2013 protests). It is evident from recent regional statistics on youth unemployment and underemployment, as well as the alarming rise in youth-related violence and the growth of gangs, that it is of critical importance to incorporate the concerns of youth within the framework of democratic development and conflict prevention.

3. STRENGTHENING THE OAS FRAMEWORK FOR PEACEBUILDING AND CONFLICT PREVENTION

In response to these realities, the OAS, through successive mandates, summit agreements and its unique Inter-American Democratic Charter, has adapted its institutional initiatives to respond to the evolving needs of OAS member states. In the areas of peace and security, development and democracy, the organization can boast about the well-established norms, mandates and practices that have contributed to conflict prevention, more recently through preventive diplomatic actions and mediation efforts.

Among the most important for the field of peacebuilding and conflict resolution are the 2001 Inter-American Democratic Charter (2001) and the 2003 Declaration of Santiago. In 2001, OAS member states reinforced their commitment to strengthen and preserve democracy through the Inter-American Democratic Charter. The Charter states:

‘the member states expressed their conviction that the Organization’s mission is not limited to the defense of democracy wherever its fundamental values and principles have collapsed, but also calls for ongoing and creative work to consolidate democracy as well as a continuing effort to prevent and anticipate the very causes of the problems that affect the democratic system of government’.
(OAS 2001)

By invoking the Charter, the government of a member state may request assistance from the secretary general or the Permanent Council for the strengthening and preservation of its democratic system if it considers that its democratic political institutional process or its legitimate exercise of power is at risk. The Charter also established democracy as the main guiding principle for the field of conflict resolution in the Americas. It implicitly called for strengthening conflict prevention measures and promoting citizen participation at all political levels as ways of consolidating democracy and peace in the region.

Also in 2001, the Plan of Action of the Third Summit of the Americas in Quebec City called for strengthening conflict prevention measures and promoting citizen participation at all political levels as ways of consolidating democracy in the region. In the Declaration of Santiago on Democracy and Public Trust: A New Commitment to Good Governance for the Americas (OAS 2003a), OAS member states recognized the importance of developing peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and consensus-building mechanisms to strengthen democratic governance in the Americas. Also, through a resolution on the promotion and strengthening of democracy (OAS 2003b) passed by the General Assembly in Santiago, the member states instructed the Permanent

Council to ‘continue to promote the exchange of experiences and best practices, so as to institutionalize dialogue as a means of promoting democratic governance and resolving conflicts’.

Today, due to the changing nature of conflict and violence in the Western Hemisphere, member states acknowledge the importance of a democratic framework that prioritizes genuine respect for human rights, capacity for social and economic development, accountability, building inclusive consensus, improving electoral processes and promoting public engagement in policymaking.

At the crux of this evolving process has been the recognition by member states of the strategic value of developing new policies and institutions for a more advanced form of collaborative democracy. Thus, the OAS has centred its efforts on fostering peaceful resolution of intra- and interstate disputes, consensus-building and cross-sector collaboration to guarantee the sustainability of the democratic process itself.

Indeed, the OAS has recognized that democracy, development and security are highly interrelated and mutually reinforcing, therefore focusing its state-building efforts on three primary pillars as mandated by its political bodies:

1. Peaceful settlement of intrastate disputes and the new security agenda in the Western Hemisphere (multidimensional concept of security);
2. The protection of human rights (through a two-pronged approach focusing on the punitive and the constructive); and
3. The defence and promotion of democracy and the strengthening of representative institutions.

As in other regions, member states in Latin America have struggled more with intrastate conflict, although the organization has also faced specific cases of tensions between states in recent years. It is important to understand that when the OAS responds to member states’ needs in areas such as mediation, crisis prevention and management, the norms and legal instruments that enable OAS action in interstate and intrastate disputes are essentially different. The OAS General Secretariat has maintained a peace mission in Colombia since 1995, which is the only country with an ongoing internal armed conflict.² Additionally, it has been recognized that the work undertaken in Colombia by the organization has substantially benefitted from the peacebuilding experience and expertise acquired in Guatemala, Nicaragua and Suriname.

As stated, the sources of challenges to democratic systems have often been domestic, which compelled OAS member states to create mechanisms to respond to such crises. Between 2001 and 2013, the region witnessed six constitutional crises (or the premature end of democratically elected presidencies) and various other political crises that had

² In addition, the OAS Mission to support the Peace Process in Colombia (Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz en Colombia, MAPP) was established in 2004 at the request of the Colombian Government in order to effectively support the government’s peace policies. The MAPP’s tasks include verification and monitoring activities related to the peace process, which has contributed greatly to increasing the trust of the population and contributing to actions that institutions carry out at the local and national level. The mission continues to support governmental initiatives geared towards the victims of the conflict, especially those who live in distant parts of the country whose rights with regard to truth, justice, and compensation have not been recognized. The MAPP has been especially receptive to vulnerable communities and to minorities.

a destabilizing effect on the democracies in the region. Through the Inter-American Democratic Charter, the OAS has been able to offer more effective assistance in the prevention and management of conflicts and political crises. The Charter has allowed the organization to play a key role in facilitating and negotiating peaceful solutions to critical political junctures, such as in Venezuela (2002), Nicaragua (2005), Ecuador (2005 and 2010), Bolivia (2008), Honduras (2009) and Paraguay (2012).

The Inter-American Democratic Charter therefore constituted a great stride forward in consolidating representative democracy in the Americas because it went far beyond the minimalist concept of democracy, i.e. the holding of competitive elections. Moreover, it established an inextricable link between democracy, human rights, integral development and poverty alleviation. It represented a commitment by OAS member states to strive to achieve these goals and, more importantly, it expanded the existing regional mechanisms available to the organization to confront political or constitutional crises and to respond to threats to the constitutional order and preserve democratic systems.

The Charter presents a more holistic concept of democracy. It recognizes that threats to democracy can come from gradual deterioration as well as sudden shocks, and provides renewed mandates to engage in countries before political developments reach the crisis stage. It also provides a more nuanced and less burdensome mechanism for action aimed at addressing threats to democratic governability in a timely manner. The OAS Secretary General and member-state representatives have had opportunities to analyse situations that put institutional processes or the legitimate exercise of power in a particular member country at risk. They have then been able to report to the Permanent Council and adopt collective decisions in order to set in motion diplomatic initiatives, including the good offices of the Secretary General, in order to restore democratic order.

Recognition that countries in the Americas continue to require assistance with institutional reforms and challenges to help ensure the primacy of the rule of law and the democratic framework so that stable democracies can flourish has been an important element in the formulation of the OAS's current strategic plan.

4. INSTITUTIONALIZING DIALOGUE IN THE AMERICAS

A mechanism that has proved successful in dealing with and preventing domestic conflicts is the implementation of dialogue processes. In the last few years, there has been increasing awareness of the importance of the institutionalization of these mechanisms not only as a means to manage or even solve existing conflicts, but also as a tool for the formulation of public policy.

A recent International Peace Institute report acknowledged growing international recognition of the importance of dialogue and collaboration within the peacebuilding and development fields, noting that ‘if peacebuilding is about strengthening societies and increasing their resilience and capacity to manage crises . . . then it needs to be seen much more as partnership between elites and local actors with a strong focus on dialogue and collaboration’ (Muggah and Altpeter 2014).

In this regard, the OAS is in a unique position to advocate the inherent relationship between dialogue, consensus and conflict prevention. Through the 2003 General Assembly Resolution on the Promotion and Strengthening of Democracy: Follow-up to the Inter-American Democratic Charter, member states instructed the Permanent Council to ‘continue to promote the exchange of experiences and best practices, so as to institutionalize dialogue as a means of promoting democratic governance and resolving conflicts’ (OAS 2003b). They also asked the General Secretariat to ‘continue [to develop] mechanisms for dialogue and instruments for the prevention and resolution of conflicts, so as to support the member states in their interactions with various political and social actors’ (OAS 2003b).

In 2004 the international community recognized that ‘democratic dialogue’, as defined by organizations working in Latin America and the Caribbean, was fundamental to strengthening democratic institutions and to bringing a wide array of societal actors into discussions that could lead to positive change. One definition of democratic dialogue refers to ‘inclusive processes that are open, sustained and flexible enough to adapt to changing contexts’. Democratic dialogue ‘can be used to achieve consensus or prevent conflict a complement to, not a replacement for, democratic institutions such as legislatures, political parties and government bodies’ (Pruitt and Thomas 2007: 1).

For the OAS, structured dialogue processes have become essential to its work in peace and security, conflict management and democratic strengthening. In this regard, the organization has continued to work with member states to enhance political dialogue and increase citizen participation in the formulation of public policy as tools for strengthening democratic governance’ (OAS 2014). At the same time, the organization has witnessed that while increased dialogue with civil society in informing policy issues and public opinion has enhanced governance in the 21st century, it has also made it

more complex. The ‘third wave of democracy’ in Latin America has embraced civil society’s new role and the gradual but steady growth of direct citizen activism. Over the last two decades, dialogue has evolved into an instrument for enhancing political debate, increasing citizens’ participation in the formulation of critical policies and promoting peaceful co-existence, collaboration and consensus among different sectors of society on key issues that could otherwise lead to tensions or conflicts.

In this context, the OAS views dialogue as an instrument for maintaining peace in the Americas ‘as part of a longer-term strategy that remains unaffected by time-sensitive crises. Dialogue, carried out in an inclusive and participatory manner, tends to lead to the kinds of agreements and relationships between actors that are likely to survive changes in administrations and become part of national policy-making process’ (Ramdin 2008). However, efforts to institutionalize dialogue mechanisms and processes, in tandem with the growth in influence of structured or national dialogues, have not been as successful. Therefore, there has emerged a marked tendency towards the utilization of de facto political power (or tactics) through demonstrations, national strikes and other actions. Organizations like the OAS and the United Nations must continue to stress the importance of integrating dialogue for building consensus and negotiation in the democratic process.

From the OAS’s perspective, the substantial field experience acquired in the countries where the OAS has promoted structured dialogue and peacebuilding strategies has laid the foundation for a stronger role in conflict prevention and has been central to the organization’s efforts to improve relations between governments and civil society across a number of countries.

In 2010 the Department for Sustainable Democracy and Special Missions established the Section for Institutional Strengthening in Dialogue and Mediation, which supports the efforts of the General Secretariat of the OAS and OAS member states to develop their capacity to promote dialogue, consensus-building and the peaceful resolution of social conflicts. The functions and the services it offers include the following:

- providing technical cooperation and advisory services in the prevention, management and resolution of social conflicts;
- strengthening the capacity of member states for conflict analysis, consensus-building and the design and implementation of dialogue, mediation and negotiation processes;
- facilitating the institutionalization of mechanisms and tools that seek to address social conflicts, and the development of medium- to long-term strategies to prevent and manage such conflicts; and
- systematizing and sharing methodologies, learning materials and lessons learned based on the OAS experience in the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts and peacebuilding.

5. THE PRO PAZ PROGRAMME IN GUATEMALA

In 1987 the presidents of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua signed the Esquipulas Accords, committing their governments to a regional peace process. Following the signing of the Accords, the Guatemalan Government and a coalition of revolutionary groups, led by the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca, URNG-MAIZ), signed 11 separate agreements covering such issues as human rights, displaced persons, uprooted communities, the rights of indigenous peoples, social and economic issues and land tenure.

Despite evident progress in the peace negotiations, officials realized that establishing peace at the local level would not be an easy task. In light of this situation and taking into consideration the OAS's experience in peacebuilding, mainly through the International Commission for Support and Verification in Nicaragua, the Guatemalan Government requested the assistance of the OAS to support the nation's peace process. The OAS Unit for the Promotion of Democracy (UPD) was invited to develop a programme to strengthen local capacity to resolve and prevent community conflict. In late 1995, after several visits and an independent needs assessment, the UPD initiated a pilot programme which, by 1996, was officially titled the Culture of Dialogue: Development of Resources for Peacebuilding in Guatemala. Today, it is more generally known as Pro Paz ('For Peace').

In 1996, the OAS began promoting the use of dialogue as a means of supporting the peace process in Guatemala. Through the innovative Pro Paz programme, the OAS aimed to strengthen the capacities of governmental and civil society organizations to engage in constructive dialogue on issues that were central to the implementation of the Guatemalan peace agreements. Pro Paz worked with government agencies and civil society groups to establish a permanent infrastructure for conflict resolution, consensus-building, democratic development and reconciliation. In March 2003, Pro Paz became a nationally coordinated initiative, the Pro Paz Foundation, institutionalizing the programme's initial goal of developing institutional capacity for conflict prevention and resolution in the country.

Through Pro Paz, the OAS realized that in order to strengthen the democratic process, actors needed to be willing to discuss, negotiate and debate their differences and needs. In this way, dialogue became the principal instrument to guide the methodology employed by the Pro Paz team. At the time, there were few organizations focused solely on the use of dialogue as a way of resolving differences. However, one organization that shared a similar goal and orientation was the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy. This definition also guided the OAS's work in Guatemala. Pro Paz was unique in that it had a broad and complex mission. It was the first occasion on which the OAS was actually

called upon to support a capacity-building process within what was clearly its most important peacebuilding mission thus far. The overall goal of the Pro Paz programme was to strengthen Guatemalan institutions and processes, in order to facilitate successful implementation of the peace accords. It aimed to help Guatemalans move from a culture of confrontation to one of dialogue by emphasizing citizen participation, joint problem-solving, consensus-building and shared decision-making. This was done primarily through capacity-building and facilitation and mediation of direct dialogue.

The Pro Paz programme was a collaborative effort on the part of the Guatemalan Government, a group of strongly committed donors and various civil society sectors. In sum, the programme assisted in the analysis of local conflicts and the provision of capacity-building to address many of the tensions and distrust that existed between indigenous leaders and the government. It also helped identify policy options and provided process assistance to parties by helping them design dialogue, negotiations and other participatory processes. This aspect of the programme allowed the OAS to contribute to the negotiations taking place in mixed commissions that dealt with difficult issues such as land and education.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE PRO PAZ PROGRAMME

Pro Paz operated within a clearly defined conceptual and operational framework for peacebuilding and conflict mitigation. It prioritized critical areas related to the conflict and improved interpersonal and institutional relationships among key actors. This approach enabled the programme to have a strategic impact on national and local peacebuilding initiatives by addressing the human, cultural and structural dimensions of peacebuilding. It started its work at the community level, which proved to be beneficial given the Guatemalan context, where years of violent confrontations had especially affected municipalities. As it evolved, however, its focus moved from the community and local level to higher levels as national institutions in charge of promoting conflict management mechanisms came into being.

Throughout its implementation, Pro Paz was based on five principles: inclusiveness, impartiality, respect for all national actors, the non-imposition of models and the non-substitution of Guatemalan actors. In order to render the programme's peacebuilding measures operational, it based its work on intersectoral cooperation and training.

From a purely methodological point of view, while training was a vital component of the programme, it was never offered as an end in itself. Rather, it was a tool to support initiatives being developed or implemented at the national, regional or municipal level. Furthermore, Pro Paz worked hard to contextualize the capacity-building initiatives that it undertook with government and civil society representatives in conflict analysis, communication and dialogue skills, negotiation, mediation, facilitation, and process design. By helping parties develop new skills, including how to organize themselves internally and make collective decisions about how to structure the talks and reach agreements, Pro Paz enhanced the prospects for successful negotiations.

The programme assisted in the mediation of several municipal conflicts and facilitated an intersectoral dialogue process on the identity of indigenous peoples. In 2001, the Guatemalan Government and other political and societal actors asked Pro Paz to design,

facilitate and implement Intersectoral Round Tables (Las Mesas Intersectoriales de Diálogo): multiparty dialogue and negotiation processes that included representatives of indigenous peoples, government, political parties and civil society.

Pro Paz was, in many ways, the most sophisticated of the OAS's peacebuilding programmes in that it addressed the roots of conflict and worked with its many participants and victims. It included an unprecedented emphasis on conflict resolution and dialogue promotion. The case of Guatemala reinforced the lessons learned from other experiences in Central America and offered additional ones. Collectively, the lessons learned from Guatemala yielded a model for strengthening the use of dialogue as a mechanism for forging peace at all levels of society in a post-war period. The home-grown nature of the Pro Paz model suggests great possibilities for its adaptation in other regions of the Americas where peace and stability are in jeopardy from internal strife.

Finally, the expertise gained through Pro Paz has had an important impact on other OAS conflict management programmes in the region. The work of the OAS in the Central American Program for the Strengthening of Democratic Dialogue, the Program for Conflict Prevention and Resolution Systems in Bolivia and most recently the work of the MAPP in Colombia all have benefited significantly from the lessons learned through the Pro Paz experience.

INSTITUTIONAL LESSONS AND CHALLENGES FROM PRO PAZ

Pro Paz was a strong catalyst for social change at multiple levels. In the post-agreement environment in Guatemala, the programme fostered and strengthened interaction between government and civil society sectors and helped them develop solutions to the various strategic problems the country was experiencing at that time.

The programme demonstrated the power of impartial and skilled facilitation. Pro Paz facilitators successfully managed a multiplicity of dialogue processes among government agencies and civil society organizations, between government institutions and at the community level. Pro Paz helped generate dialogue mechanisms that contributed to resolving local conflicts and restoring confidence among the population.

The Pro Paz model demonstrated the strategic importance of capacity-building in conflict management, consensus-building and conflict prevention and resolution. The programme prepared a pool of well-trained and committed individuals who continue to work in Guatemala in various sectors in the promotion of dialogue, the establishment of mechanisms for cross-sector collaboration and third-party facilitation. It is important to point out that the programme worked to create internal capacity and was able to avoid creating a dependency on international counterparts.

The lessons provided by the Pro Paz programme's work in Guatemala (particularly in the area of peacebuilding) offered the potential for replication in other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. In fact, the OAS was one of the first international organizations to publish manuals and guidelines on consensus-building, tolerance and community reconciliation, methodologies and techniques for dialogue facilitation, including training handbooks dealing with dialogue facilitation and conflict transformation, thus contributing to the existing literature on peacebuilding.

Similarly, Pro Paz technical experts also became regular participants in international forums and workshops, building knowledge on post-conflict intervention in ethnically divided societies. In addition, the Pro Paz programme served as a testing ground for the development of peacebuilding experience and became an actor in conflict management initiatives in the Americas.

Pro Paz provided an excellent testing ground for the OAS in its efforts to examine the structural causes of the conflict in Guatemala. The OAS was able to understand, through this whole process, the links between operational conflict prevention, democratic development, human security, environmental sustainability and economic development, among other important aspects. It became clear then that consultation with local actors, and their inclusion through various policy channels, was essential to preventing another rapid deterioration of the democratic process initiated with the signing of the peace agreement.

One of the early challenges faced in Guatemala was how to demonstrate to government counterparts that a peacebuilding initiative of this magnitude would need to be fully inclusive and would need to incorporate all relevant sectors and actors in society. In Guatemala, while there was recognition of the importance of civil society in a process of this kind, the political environment was not conducive to allowing all voices to be heard, not to mention the high degree of distrust that had existed for decades between civil society and government.

Furthermore, Guatemala has a large indigenous population, whose communities were the main victims of this conflict. For Pro Paz, the decision to mandate government representatives to negotiate with their civil society counterparts on the implementation of the specific agreements was extremely useful in ensuring that the process was inclusive and effective.

Another important challenge was ensuring that every component of the programme's design was contextualized to the realities on the ground. In other words, the OAS was constantly balancing the needs of different sectors with the overall goals of the peace process. Experts will argue that any intervention should lead to tangible results, results that people can actually understand, agree to and respect. However, the non-binding nature of dialogue in some instances could be perceived as a negative incentive on the process, and this can have a direct impact on its success or failure. In Guatemala, this issue became essential from a national perspective. In other words, dialogue for the sake of dialogue is not an incentive for parties to sit down and negotiate. Such experiences have taught the international community that a dialogue should reach specific agreements, and implementation and effective delivery are the responsibility of international actors, as third parties supporting a particular dialogue process, and of the official representatives committed to the success of the process.

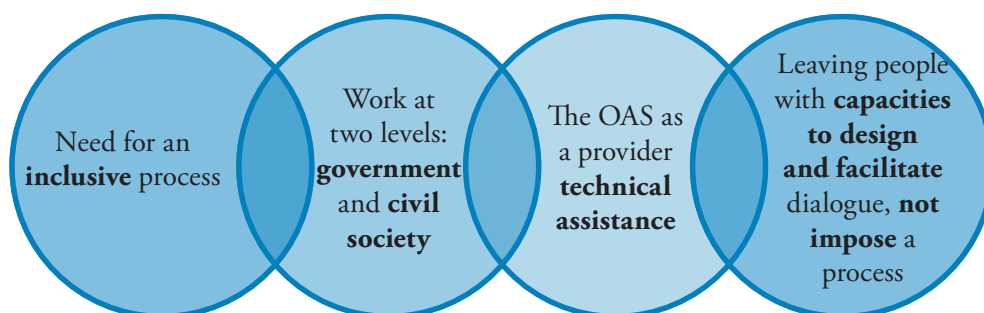
On the technical side, one constraining factor identified early in the programme was that before structured dialogue or consensus-building could take place, actors needed to be equipped with adequate skills for communicating, analysing and building consensus. In Guatemala, Pro Paz faced different levels of abilities and capabilities among actors. Thus, civil society and government collaboration depended on this perceived ability of whether the parties could effectively engage at the same level. To address this challenge, the programme quickly prioritized the need to provide support

to civil society representatives, indigenous representatives who lacked the experience or skills to engage in consensus-building processes. Through highly contextualized training, the programme made these spaces as open and trustworthy as possible. It expanded the problem-solving capacity of actors by working on two levels: the informal level (as it was called at the time), offering informal spaces for people to learn and to develop skills in basic communication, conflict analysis, consensus-building and, at times, even negotiation; and at the formal level, through individual commissions and formal negotiating round tables.

The incorporation of inter-sectoral dialogue became another of Pro Paz’s distinguishing features. In the Guatemalan peace accords, the defined thematic issues—labour, land distribution, human rights and indigenous rights—were divided among various mixed commissions. This provided a clearly defined framework of actors and facilitated the involvement of leaders from civil society who were interested in discussing these topics with their government counterparts.

Figure 1 illustrates Pro Paz’s general methodology, which was adapted gradually over time to respond to the changing needs of the actors and the peace process. This approach also facilitated consensus under conditions that could have had a negative or positive impact on the overall implementation of the peace agreement. The programme also realized early on that being aware of the history and context of a particular conflict process was just as important as having a dialogue itself, as the latter must respond to many underlying conditions.

Figure 1. Pro Paz’s general methodology



DIALOGUE LESSONS FROM PRO PAZ

One final important lesson from Pro Paz was the intrinsic value of process design, ownership and relationship-building among the actors. Perhaps from a purely institutional perspective, this factor became more apparent to the OAS as the programme became more involved in local peacebuilding.

Pro Paz lasted for seven years. This period presented a challenge for the OAS secretariat in advocating long-term support for the Guatemalan peace process. Indeed, some OAS member states at the time were sceptical about peacebuilding, promotion of dialogue and local consensus-building and the time needed to generate the basic conditions to enable progress.

However, the ability of the OAS to support the peace process from beginning to end, and build a clear exit strategy and transition process, was strategically important to the programme's donors. Both the OAS and its donors increasingly recognized that ownership of the process could only be achieved if the dialogue processes were designed with the actors themselves. That is, the OAS worked with Guatemalan actors in analysing how to design these processes, keeping in mind the capacity of indigenous actors to engage and the level of communication that existed among them.

The OAS was able to play a strategic role in support of the Guatemalan peace process and in the institutionalization of mechanisms for dialogue and consensus-building. By increasing the capacity of political actors, their institutions and other relevant stakeholders to strengthen the democratic process in Guatemala, the OAS facilitated implementation of the peace agreements. Through this experience, the OAS realized it was crucial to generating political will among all the actors to ensure sustainable peace processes. The transparency and flow of information were as important as the process itself. Social actors and the government needed to have equal and fair access to reliable and relevant information, as well as training and education.

Today, organizations working to facilitate dialogue agree that adequate capacity-building and sufficient resources to carry out a dialogue process are fundamental to its successful outcome. There is a constant need to protect this process, its development and to ensure that adequate financial resources are there to support it. Coordination is very important because effective dialogue processes need to be well coordinated between all sectors and actors involved. Communication, regardless of what kind of dialogue is chosen, is the ability to listen and create consensus on issues. The interests and needs of parties must be recognized if new relationships are to be created. The success or failure of a dialogue process really depends on the quality of the interactions between the actors and the people who are involved.

6. FUTURE ROLES FOR THE OAS IN CONFLICT PREVENTION AND PEACEBUILDING

Recently, in the area of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, the OAS has been focusing its efforts on strengthening its role in preventive diplomacy, generating channels for communication between governments and building institutions that have helped prevent crises or the escalation of disputes that may lead to violent conflicts in the Americas.

Preventive diplomacy has been employed both to resolve tensions among countries and to help governments handle internal conflicts. Likewise, the OAS Secretary General has played an active role through his good offices, bringing key parties together for dialogue and problem solving. OAS assistance, programmes and special missions have exerted a positive political impact in situations ranging from armed struggle to low-intensity violence and volatile political tension.

In 2005, the OAS established the Department of Sustainable Democracy and Special Missions (DSDSM) under the OAS Secretariat for Political Affairs, which is the current focal point and principal advisory unit to the secretary general on political issues, developments, challenges and crises that have taken place or that may occur in the future. Among other activities, the department provides advisory and technical services to special missions established by the OAS Permanent Council and/or General Secretariat in the event of a potential or ongoing conflict, or in response to a request from a member state.

Throughout the various states of a crisis, the OAS uses a variety of measures, including country assessments and analytical exercises, special and exploratory missions, impartial facilitation and negotiation services, to support dialogue processes. Facilitation, negotiation and ongoing long-term missions are indicative of OAS interests.

Since 2010 the DSDSM has been working to strengthen its capacity in mediation and conflict resolution. In this sense, the DSDSM has been able to enhance its institutional support within the organization, as well as to member states. It has worked to develop internal tools by regaining the organization's institutional memory and experience in the field, as well as to establish closer relationships with national institutions from OAS member states that are currently working on this subject and assessing the needs of the region to provide the necessary assistance.

As mentioned earlier, the OAS has deployed special missions to Bolivia, Ecuador, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua and Paraguay in response to requests for assistance to address real or potential political or institutional crises. These experiences highlight the important role the OAS can play in responding to such crises, as well as assisting member states with the prevention and resolution of conflicts.

One very significant lesson for the OAS was the recognition that, in the area of conflict prevention, the most strategic assistance the organization could offer member states was to help governments (and to a lesser extent civil society) build national capacities, tools and skills, and assist countries seeking ways to institutionalize conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms within government structures. In this regard, there are several specific lessons that are particularly relevant to building capacity for effective peacebuilding based on the organization's experience of over 20 years of democratic strengthening in the Americas.

First, priority should be placed on the design of the process during and after peacekeeping, peacebuilding or a crisis support operation. The single most important lesson that the OAS has learned is that in order for peace to be sustained, the concerned national actors have to be supported in owning and resolving the relevant issues independently. Institutions and other subregional organizations that can continue dialogue or peacebuilding efforts should be identified early on and supported by the UN and others through mobilized funding and cooperation.

Regional organizations can also collaborate with multilateral organizations such as the UN or the European Union by assisting in defining a given country's political objectives and priority areas. This could include:

- analysing the root causes of the conflict (as was the case in Guatemala);
- dispatching joint delegations to conflict-prone areas;
- conducting joint assessment missions to observe ongoing progress and identify weaknesses;
- managing expectations and emphasizing the value of long-term development assistance; and
- fostering a better relationship between regional organizations and other external actors.

The OAS has been working in a number of countries for many years and has interacted closely in several other sectors on a number of issues, such as democratic development, elections, security and the protection and promotion of human rights. Given the OAS's relationship with its member states, it has the ability to implement a more comprehensive approach to conflict prevention at both national and multilateral levels.

ACTIONS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

The OAS should link political actions in preventive diplomacy with long-term capacity-building within countries. The development of skills must be carried out at different levels of government, whether by way of institutionalizing a unit, a strategy or simply mainstreaming the ability throughout state institutions.

The OAS should also acknowledge the limitations of early-warning mechanisms, which may prove useful in certain cases, but which remain a very sensitive issue to most member states. In political organizations like the OAS, issues of non-intervention and

sovereignty play an important role and affect the ability of the organization to affect the problem at hand. Securing consent from the member state, which involves provisions in the Democratic Charter, is only possible after the problem has arisen.

One alternative that the OAS considered in the early 2000s was to assist member states in developing their own early-warning systems. Helping member states understand which policies actually exacerbate conflict and what kind of policies could actually reduce or mitigate the escalation of conflict. Furthermore, the OAS could consider redirecting its efforts to develop national programmes to increase the capacity for political negotiation between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government.

ACTIONS AT THE MULTILATERAL LEVEL

Today, most OAS member states realize that dialogue processes must lead to an organic process, whether it is peacebuilding, post-conflict agreements or a resolution of the problem at hand. This recognition has posed additional challenges for regional organizations, particularly against the backdrop of a changing and fluid political landscape and interstate relations. If regional organizations are to make progress in preventing the escalation of conflict and strengthening democratic societies, they must continue to strengthen their internal capacity and resources to meet these challenges.

As such, the OAS and other international organizations have found that joint assessments between donors, host countries and the international community can help with key challenges that most international institutions must contend with when dealing with strengthening democracy and building peace. For example, international actors sometimes do not allow sufficient time to analyse and understand fully the importance of a number of factors when supporting or assisting a country in a particular state-building or peace process.

It is critically important to develop a comprehensive understanding of the national context, state capacity, the role of state institutions in the process or the true sources of the conflict. Lack of understanding in this regard can have a negative impact on the quality of any intervention. Furthermore, failing to provide time-bound donor assistance within a strategic framework and long-term commitment can hamper third parties attempting to assist with the rebuilding of state institutions or essential dialogue processes. Any intervention must also include a parallel process for institutional and capacity strengthening. This can be vital for sustaining any agreements reached during the intervention.

From a multilateral perspective, it may be more effective to maintain a low profile through quiet diplomacy, especially in terms of pre-conflict engagement. This is particularly important for regional organizations that are constrained by the requirement that member states authorize such engagement. Preventive diplomacy can only go so far in resolving deep-rooted conflicts. Long-term development assistance and strengthening of democratic institutions may be the most strategic form of conflict prevention and management.

Finally, from an OAS perspective, it has become evident that the strengthening of the Inter-American Democratic Charter to enable a more proactive role for the OAS

in quiet preventive diplomacy would benefit member states. The OAS must provide mechanisms via which the OAS leadership (as well as representatives of member states) can facilitate dialogue discreetly, especially in crises that involve sensitive political issues related to the sovereignty of a country. This would allow parties to calmly evaluate the situation, weigh various options and consider alternatives to resolving their differences, without the public or institutional scrutiny that usually arises in relation to international conflict prevention.

7. CONCLUSIONS

While the nature of violence and its causes in the current context of Latin America has changed since the OAS supported the peace process in Guatemala, the field methodology and institutional lessons are still quite relevant. The value of a dialogue process is linked to its ability to address issues that are generating tensions in government or society.

Ultimately, dialogue can be viewed as a tool of governance that can foster representative and participatory forms of democracy. Regardless of whether they are called dialogue round tables, presidential commissions, national forums, councils of notables or governability pacts, they are in essence political dialogue processes in which representatives of governments, political parties and organized civil society can come together to re-establish democratic order or address deep tensions in society.

From the long-standing experience of the OAS, there are some minimum conditions to ensure that a dialogue process is successful and is able to address the issues it has been mandated to negotiate. First, dialogue processes should ensure they are designed against the backdrop of a legal framework that will protect the process. The right of actors to engage in free and equal decision-making processes can be strengthened if a legal framework exists. This framework must facilitate the interaction between the state and the relevant social sectors.

Additionally, it is crucial to secure adequate political will and support in different social sectors, as well as in the state, so as to have transparent dialogue and therefore increase the possibility of reaching an agreement. From a technical perspective, adequate training and education for the actors engaging in a dialogue process are essential. Finally, the development of dialogue processes and required assistance depends mainly, but not solely, on the availability of sufficient financial resources.

An effective dialogue process needs to include all relevant stakeholders and must be well coordinated between all sectors affected by the outcome of the process. Regardless of what kind of dialogue is chosen, the ability to listen and jointly create a broader understanding of the issues, interests and needs of each party, as well as to foster closer interpersonal and inter-institutional relationships, is key. The success or failure of the dialogue process will depend on the quality of the interactions and the communication between actors.

Today, OAS member states need the organization to help with a multiplicity of multidimensional and transnational threats that are weakening democratic governance and human security throughout the Americas. Meeting these challenges will require effective dialogue and coordination with subregional organizations, civil society groups and the private sector so that they also assume a greater role in defining the issues,

determining options and implementing viable solutions that can help achieve peace and strengthen governance in their respective countries. The OAS can use its comparative advantages, which are not based on coercion but, rather, on its moral authority and its capacity to act as an honest broker of region-wide consensus, to carry out important dialogue processes in support of domestic efforts to strengthen democratic rule in the region. Too often, governments are forced to focus on short-term actions instead of strategic development objectives—the reactive versus preventive policy trade-off that is often at the root of popular discontent. This is the challenge of the present day.

Member states, international institutions and civil society organizations have an important role to play in strengthening democratic governance and promoting the peaceful resolution of complex problems. However, the fundamental question remains: how can donors, member states and non-state actors work towards more effective and timely conflict prevention, leaving in place the kind of capacity necessary so that states may find their own solutions to their own problems?

Apart from what the OAS can offer through political mediation, shuttle diplomacy and technical cooperation actions, the OAS's comparative advantages lie in its convening power among its member states and its ability to work with all levels of government in forging consensus on important policies, both nationally and regionally. The ability of the OAS to work at both the political and technical levels, along with its commitment to help strengthen state institutions in democratic practices and values, are for many states the best preventive capacity that the organization brings to the multilateral cooperation framework.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yadira A. Soto is a senior political advisor on Governance and Security to the Assistant Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS). Previously she was the Coordinator of the Office for Conflict Prevention and Resolution in the OAS Department of Political and Democratic Affairs. Since 1997 she has been instrumental in the design and implementation of strategic programmes in conflict management and dialogue facilitation at the national and subregional levels in OAS member states. In 2002, with support from the donor community, she facilitated the establishment of the Unit for the Promotion of Dialogue and Conflict Resolution within the OAS. She has worked in dialogue promotion in Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru and Haiti, and has published several works on regional and national policies to mainstream conflict-management mechanisms within state structures. She was a member of the Editorial Board for *Democratic Dialogue: A Handbook for Practitioners* (International IDEA/United Nations Development Programme/OAS, 2007).

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<http://www.idea.int/democracydialog/>



International IDEA
SE -103 34 Stockholm
Sweden
Phone + 46 8 698 37 00
Fax + 46 8 20 24 22
Email: info@idea.int
Website: <http://www.idea.int>