



EIGHTH SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OPEN WORKING GROUP ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Comments for Co-Chair meeting: Conflict prevention, post-conflict peacebuilding and promotion of durable peace, rule of law and governance

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, men and women workers, all of us, it is my pleasure to address this Open Working Group session for Public Services International on behalf of the Major Group of Workers and Trade Unions.

In conflict, there are the factions, whether armed or not, and aggressors and defenders, whether armed or not. There are perpetrators and victims. But there are also those who struggle on any side to provide continuity in the services that are publically provided to the population, notably in: administration - including the judicial system - municipal services, fire-fighting, utilities - that include water, electricity and energy - and, critically, in education and in health and social services. And sometimes these public services are also among the victims - both the public service institutions themselves and the public service workers who deliver them.

At the onset of violence, just as in the case of disasters and other emergencies, public service workers are propelled to the front line because of the nature of the services they provide and that the population needs, especially to prevent harm and injury, to help those who are injured, and ensure access to goods and services that are publically provided.

These frontline workers are exposed to the same dangers as the population, but it is their duty to protect and serve. Most often, the demands made on them surpass any possible restrictions from labour laws and any regulations in respect of hours worked and exposure to hardship, injury and death. In many legal systems, they can be called to serve as essential services, and to serve at the discretion of their governments for as long and intensely as needed. Very frequently, they serve in these situations because they want to and that is the nature of public service, but that does not change the nature of their plight.

It is the rule of law that is violated when conflict erupts, yet it is incumbent on the rule of law to protect the rights of all workers, and the failure of the rule of law in conflict has damaging effects on societies that is multiplied by the damage to workers who serve them. The deconstruction of public services and weakening of the public service workforce, whether as a consequence of conflict, disasters, emergencies, or austere budgetary decisions in the face of financial and economic crises, damages societies in ways that are long and hard to reverse. We have seen that increased poverty and increased inequality have long-standing impacts from one generation to the next.

Conflict can be prevented by good governance which must include robust public services and a strong public service workforce. Collective bargaining and social dialogue are good models of conflict prevention in democracies governed by the rule of law. In the efforts to reconstruct societies post-conflict, a pillar of that reconstruction is to strengthen public services and the public services workforce, as well as to fully respect labour rights. The International Labour Organization Conventions are the fundamental standards in this regard.

Reconstruction must not be exploited as an alibi for cutting public spending and outsourcing services to private interests. Indeed, this equates to shifting public revenues to subsidize the private sector, whose driver is profit and not service and for whom reconstruction is an economic opportunity and a commercial undertaking.

Furthermore, privatizing services that people need daily does nothing to aid reconstruction after conflict. First, profiteering, commercial competition and battling for markets – often in a judicial vacuum - are the antithesis of peacebuilding, and can be harmful to the delicate process of shoring up reconciliation and peace. Second, the absence of benefit from the full enjoyment of labour rights and from the re-growth of the rights and freedoms that contribute to peace - including freedom of association, collective bargaining and social dialogue – will delay the resolution of conflict and the reconstruction of society.

We are now envisaging a global development agenda that will include, finally, the great social and economic equalizers of Universal Health Coverage and of Social Protection Floors.

This vision must embrace the means to achieve them.

One means will be their financing, and many alternatives are already on the table.

The other means are the human resources to implement the vision.

Universal Health Coverage is achievable only if supported by a strong commitment to health service systems that are public, in the service of quality, availability, accessibility and acceptability.

Only public services can ensure the affordability required for true universality.

Indeed, Universal Health Coverage and Social Protection Floors are concepts founded - and deeply embedded - in human rights and in the realization of the right to health, as embodied in the Constitution of the World Health Organization and enshrined as a right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Good governance and the rule of law are not only to ensure the protection of the rights of all workers, but to make possible the realization of a world where inequality and inequity are fought with tools of equal magnitude that correspond to the size of the task.

In a rights-based framework for the post-2015 Agenda, the Member States of the United Nations must together resolve, and - beyond political willingness - determine - and design the means to ensure - that the right to work; the right to equal pay for equal work; the right to form and join trade unions; and the right to social security - all enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – as well as the right to safe and healthy working conditions; the right to improvement of all aspects of environmental and industrial hygiene; and to the prevention, treatment and control of occupational diseases – all enshrined in the Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - are, finally, fully realized and universally enjoyed.