

The Most Dangerous Time in Human History: How Family Literacy in UN Member States Has Become A Conduit for Sustaining Peace

Denny Taylor
Professor Emeritus, Literacy Studies
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“We are certainly in the most dangerous time in human history,” Jeffrey Sachs said at the meeting “Sustaining Peace: Partnerships for Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding” convened by the UN and Columbia University (December 8, 2017).¹

“We must start with the proposition we don’t take war and peace seriously.” Sachs, who is the Special Advisor to the UN Secretary-General on the Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs), told the standing room only crowd.

Sachs supported this statement by presenting the evidence. He spoke of the amount of money “outlays” spent on military armaments; the destruction of capital, lives and livelihoods; the cost of basic needs and emergency response initiatives; and the international response to refugee movements. He advised participants to pay attention to the Global Peace Index and said that 11 to 13% of the Global World Product, which amounts to ten trillion dollars per annum, is spent on war.

Refusing to soften the delivery of his message, Sachs went on to state, “The U.S. is one of the most violent and costly places in the world.” A shift, he argued, needs to take place so there is a common understanding that “if you blow it up you rebuild it.”

“War mongers should pay,” he said, his ire evident to everyone in the room, “just as polluters pay.”

Not letting up. Sachs continued by talking about “proxy wars”. Naming Syria, he stated it is not a civil war. He said “proxy wars” occur when regional powers try to bring down a regime. Naming the U.S., he spoke of geopolitical strategic meddling by outside global powers.

Sachs ended his presentation by raising concerns about the lack of commitment to peace or to conflict avoidance by UN Member States, and he stressed that there needs to be more emphasis on peacebuilding, peacekeeping, and reconstruction. Even so, he declared that the UN is the most vital institution for peace and our best hope of survival.

The President of the UN General Assembly, H.E. Miroslav Lajčák provided the questions that must be asked if the concerns expressed by Sachs are to be addressed by the UN Member States, academia, and civil society.

“It is important that we respond to the big and important questions,” Lajčák said in his opening address. “There is no room for complacency.” He spoke of “too many local and regional conflicts” and of the need to “sustain peace – a peace that lasts for generations.”

¹ All quotes are taken from notes made at the meeting and not from transcripts.

He talked about “conflicts within and between countries,” and he said, “We do not have a good mechanism for dealing with them.”

Lajčák spoke of the need to stay ahead of potential conflicts, and of the UN’s resolution to do so. He emphasized the need for: conflict prevention; predictable and sustainable financing of prevention; more coherence in the UN support for peace; and partnerships with civil society with the intent of sustaining peace. He repeated several times that local knowledge and participation of the local people in peace initiatives is of vital importance.

“What tools do we have at our disposal?” Lajčák asked at the end of his address. “And, how can we give greater visibility to sustaining peace?”

The remainder of this paper addresses the questions posed by Miroslav Lajčák, first by drawing on the “tools” described by presenters at the conference, and second by providing greater visibility to the family literacy initiatives of UN Member States that are instrumental in sustaining peaceful coexistence in human societies around the world.

How Do We Sustain Peace That Lasts For Generations?

H.E. Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti, Chef de Cabinet, Executive of the UN Secretary General, spoke of the “unintended consequences of globalization.” She said, “Inequality has grown even more acute” and she expressed concern that so have “global anxieties.”

“Too many parties consider war the answer,” Viotti said. She added the looming consequences of climate change to the anxieties and very real threats of local and regional armed conflict and global war.

Adding to her list of global anxieties Viotti said, “The roots of radicalization were not well understood,” but that “there is a surge of diplomacy for peace – for sustaining peace, increasing coherence and reducing fragmentation.”

“Too long the world has tolerated the impacted of armed conflict,” Viotti said, and she emphasized the appeal for peace made by the Secretary General of the UN António Guterres, and his call for inclusive sustainable development.

Asif Khan, Chief, Mediation Support Unit for the UN Department of Political Affairs, spoke of “demystifying sustaining peace” and the “political will” to “work with host governments for coherence,” to establish a “goal inclusive vision,” and a “change of mindset” linking prevention of armed conflict with development and sustainability.

The framework presented by Khan addressed the warnings presented by Sachs, and is a vital response to the question posed by Lajčák of how we create and sustain a lasting peace within and between nations. Changing the mindset of so many leaders and delegates from the UN Member States is a daunting and seemingly impossible task, but the idea of linking “prevention of armed conflict” with “development and sustainability” provides a portal for considering the achievement of the idea – especially given that the Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) are already agreed upon by UN Member States.

Drawing on the address by Lajčák, the overarching principle of this reframing is that *sustaining peace that lasts for generations is a process that will need continuous local,*

regional and global efforts to maintain coherence and cooperation and ensure long-term peaceful coexistence.

Embedded in the other presentations In this reframing, some of the other key elements of armed conflict prevention and sustainable development can be found in the presentations of the other speakers at the Sustaining Peace Conference. The three key elements discussed were prevention, development, and sustainability, and the need to strengthen the resilience of local communities was also noted as well as breaking down of silos.

Presenters spoke of the importance of sustaining peace initiatives that are locally led, regionally supported, and internationally funded. There was agreement that local knowledge is of vital importance, and that there need to be opportunities for local communities to have a leadership role. Also discussed was the need for much greater roles for women in all aspects of peace building and sustainable development initiatives.

But then came the questions from the audience. Sachs stood up and took the mic bringing armed conflict – the dominant framework of human experience –back into the room. He spoke of the inadequacy of the global response to armed conflict, and the people in the audience expressed similar concerns:

What if a country is not willing to participate in conflict resolution?
What does it actually mean for peacebuilding in local contexts?
How can we respond to the increasing militarization of societies?
How do we influence change in our own countries?

None of the panel member addressed how to “break down silos” as one person put it, and shift the way in which UN Member States think about war and peace.

“They support sustaining peace initiatives,” one panelist said, “but most do not want peace initiatives in their own back yards.”

And yet, an argument can be made that highly successful unrecognized peace initiatives are already taking place.

Family Literacy Initiatives in UN Member States Fulfill Many of the Goals for Sustaining Peace

A remarkable fact not mentioned in relationship to sustaining peace is that UN Member States – considered to have “silos mentalities” and to be resistant to UN peacebuilding and peacekeeping initiatives – are actually already supporting such initiatives through family literacy programs that are well-established in their countries. There are now family literacy initiatives in all UN Member States.

Family literacy² has evolved into a peaceful way of responding to many local, regional and global conflicts that are deleterious to the health and wellbeing and even survival of

² The concept of “family literacy” originated in Taylor’s doctoral research. It is a social science concept that is now ubiquitous as an organizing principle – a way of framing reading and writing programs for children, their families, and communities throughout the world.

vulnerable families.³ Ethnographic research also provides evidence of how vital family literacy is to cohesion and reducing fragmentation within communities. In fact it could be argued that unbeknownst to many, peace building is almost ubiquitous in UN Member States through successful family literacy initiatives, and a reframing of the concept of “sustaining peace” is recommended to include the efforts by local communities, as well as regional and international organizations, to overcome the enormous challenges confronting families as they endeavor to live healthy, productive and *peaceful* lives.

There is research evidence that people who can read and so are healthier, happier and live longer than people who don't, and that women and girls who are educated have fewer children and those they do have are twice as likely to survive. There is also evidence to support the statement that for every 1% increase in a country's literacy rate, there is a permanent 1.5% increase in its gross national product. ... And that illiteracy costs the global economy \$1.19 trillion each year.⁴

There are three evidence-based aspects of family literacy initiatives that support the rethinking and reframing of “sustaining peace”.

First: family literacy has become a vital and successful way of promoting literacy in families and communities that improves life circumstances and increases the literacy levels in many UN Member States.

Based upon available data, most, if not all, UN Member States have family literacy programs that:

- Create systems of care for children and their families (Global)
- Provide books and informational materials (Global)
- Nurture and sustain literacy as a shared and valuable skill (Global)
- Encourage parents and children to read for pleasure and for information (Global)
- Provide opportunities to write and share family stories (Global)
- Promote a community-wide culture of reading (Global)
- Respond to the local literacy needs of children, families and communities (Global)
- Empower new learners by tapping into literacy traditions and practices supported by family networks (Global)
- Establish innovative family literacy programs that are multi-categorical (Global)

Second: family literacy is used to frame peace enhancing initiatives by UN Member States.

Countries such as Afghanistan, Nepal, and Sub Saharan Africa offer village based family literacy programs, which seek to develop literacy in the context of community needs such as health, employment and family planning. In some countries family literacy initiatives are designed to reduce gender inequality and family violence, while in other

³ Family Literacy became a field of study in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the research of Shirley Brice Heath and Elsa Auerbach, as well as the research of Denny Taylor, creating the foundation of the field. Catherine Compton Lilly, who has also added greatly to the foundational work of the family literacy originators, has documented the emergence of this new field of study.

⁴ <http://www.read.gov/literacyawards/>

countries family literacy programs focus on the amelioration of psychological and emotional traumas resulting from armed conflict and the support of family members physically disabled by war. For example, family literacy peace enhancing programs have been established to:

- Respond to the needs and concerns about health, employment and family planning (Afghanistan; Albania; Sub Saharan Africa)
- Respond to the psychosocial needs of women (Afghanistan; Egypt)
- Respond to war trauma and PTSD (Afghanistan; Iraq)
- Respond to issues of child labor, family violence, and other life adversities (Afghanistan)
- Establish literacy programs for socially excluded families (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
- Establish literacy and peace education classes for families (Iraq)
- Establish literacy programs, especially for women and girls who want to attend schools and literacy classes in order to lead a peaceful and better life (Iraq; Bangladesh)
- Establish programs empowering rural women to develop literacy skills through the writing and documenting of their own poetry as a cultural resource that is valued both locally and nationally (Yemen)
- Establish programs in low-literacy regions, e.g. with families in the deeply-rural, under-resourced mountain valleys of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa)
- Create home based programs to engage with families in literacy activities (South Africa)
- Create literacy centers of care for vulnerable children and mothers (South Africa)
- Combat HIV and AIDS through informational literacy activities (South Africa)
- Establish family and community literacy programs for children isolated and needlessly separated from their families (Armenia)
- Encourage family literacy for boys and girls living in poverty by developing basic literacy and using “communication technology” (Azerbaijan)
- Develop family literacy programs for young children working to contribute to family incomes (Bangladesh)

Highlighted here are the family literacy initiatives in UN Member States. Family literacy has also become a conduit for the peaceful relocation of refugees and economic migrants in Canada, the U.S., and many countries in Europe, especially Germany and Sweden. In many economically advantaged countries family literacy programs are available, especially for mothers and children learning new languages and life skills so that they can survive and thrive in the new places that have become their home.

Third: Family literacy is integral to and in keeping with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

A systematic analysis of the family literacy initiatives undertaken by UN Member States indicates that family literacy is used in most countries in ways that are in keeping with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Most importantly, family literacy initiatives are used to promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies. The focus of worldwide family literacy initiatives on many of the other 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is also both remarkable and profound:

- GOAL 1: No Poverty

- GOAL 2: Zero Hunger
- GOAL 3: Good Health and Well-being
- GOAL 4: Quality Education
- GOAL 5: Gender Equality
- GOAL 6: Clean Water and Sanitation
- GOAL 7: Affordable and Clean Energy
- GOAL 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
- GOAL 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
- GOAL 10: Reduced Inequality
- GOAL 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities
- GOAL 12: Responsible Consumption and Production
- GOAL 13: Climate Action
- GOAL 14: Life Below Water
- GOAL 15: Life on Land
- GOAL 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions
- GOAL 17: Partnerships to achieve the Goal

Most family literacy programs in UN Member States are conceptually plural and are focused on ending poverty and hunger, and on promoting good health and wellbeing.⁵ The majority of initiatives have as their mission inclusive quality education, gender equality, climate action, peace and justice, and revitalizing partnerships for the goals. Most include programs especially for girls and women.

At a time when the rapid development of technology is outpacing diplomacy and AI weaponry is available that can activate without human involvement, it is essential that every possibility of sustaining peace is taken seriously. Sachs is right – this is the most dangerous time in human history. The existential threats are many but so are the opportunities to respond to them. Family literacy initiatives in UN Member States offer a viable approach to sustaining peace that it would be regrettable to miss.

A shift of thinking will be required from bureaucratic to adhocatic, more open, transparent and quick. At the Sustaining Peace Meeting the panelists seemed stymied when asked questions by the audience, but each question can be addressed:

- What if a country is not willing to participate in conflict resolution?

Keep trying, but find another way. Support initiatives – such as family literacy initiatives – that are already well established in the country and incorporate the elements of the specific programs into local and regional conversations about the many ways in which these programs not only enhance the lives of people in local communities, but also encourage the development of frameworks for living that will sustain peace.

- What does it actually mean for peacebuilding in local contexts?

Once again the response is to support the initiatives already established in local communities, and to listen carefully to local people to discover what further

⁵ A 40 year retrospective of Taylor's family literacy research is presented in *From Family Literacy to Earth System Science*. Her research has very similar to the global trajectory of the theoretical of use of the concept to promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies.

initiatives are needed to ameliorate the adverse circumstances of their everyday lives. Peace is a process not an event, and the responsibility of the global community is to work alongside people in local communities to enhance their lives and encourage new frameworks for thinking about sustaining peace. In this work the UN Sustainable Development Goals are of critical importance and it is important to note that all of the goals, in various configurations, are central to the family literacy initiatives in UN Member States.

- How can we respond to the increasing militarization of societies?

In the short term transparency about the cost of production and the human cost of the use of armaments is a priority.⁶ Follow Sachs' advice and pay attention to the Global Peace Index. Do everything you can to encourage people in your local community, the country in which you live, and in the larger arenas in which you participate to learn more about the costs of war – not only by disaggregating the appropriation funding and identifying which groups and individuals profit from the ten trillion dollars per annum that is spent on war, but also in terms of human costs and costs to the environment.

Armaments are constitutive of the architecture of human societies. The industrial military complex is not an abstract concept – it represents 11 to 13% of the Global World Product – and with the great acceleration of AI capability it has become an existential threat that is not only nuclear but also technological.

For a few, militarization brings unimagined power, wealth and privilege. In many countries, the US and UK in particular, the amount of money “outlays” spent on military armaments and the destruction of capital, lives, and livelihoods is rarely questioned. The minds of the people have been colonized – enculturated into believing in their exceptionalism and in the nobility of war and they are willing to give their lives for these ideals.

In the long term the shifts in thinking that are needed to counter militarization will depend on the increased efforts of civil society to work with UN Member States on local initiatives that are framed by the Sustainable Development Goals. This is a form of decolonization that is rarely discussed, but is entirely possible if more emphasis is placed on a re-visioning of the lives of struggling people. From this perspective family literacy initiatives in UN Member States, alongside many other more well established peace keeping efforts, could become a significant conduit for achieving and sustaining peaceful coexistence both within and between nations.

- How do we influence change in our own countries?

First, by considering the deleterious ways in which the increasing militarization of human societies has impacted our own ways of thinking and being in the world.

⁶ See: <http://garnpress.com/books/the-children-of-sandy-hook-vs-the-u-s-congress-and-gun-violence-in-america/>

We live at a time when modest incremental technological advances have been replaced by groundbreaking developments that are shaking the foundations of human societies. It is imperative that we recognize this and participate in conversations – or perhaps by writing, as in this paper – about what we can do to respond to the existential risks that are jeopardizing the future of people and the planet.

We who live our lives small can think big, and we must do so now for the sake of our children. While the technological advances are potentially catastrophic they also bring with them possibilities for good. The systemic changes which are essential for human survival begins with us. We can contribute to these changes by taking seriously our participation in peaceful co-existence in our own local and virtual communities, caring for the health and wellbeing of others, and contributing to local initiatives similar to the family literacy programs established in UN Member States.

A Proposal for a UN Family Literacy Global Peace Initiative Building on the Family Literacy Engagement of UN Member States

No mention of family literacy has been found in the UN documentation that focuses on sustaining peace,⁷ and yet there are three intertwined aspects of the UN Member State family literacy initiatives that are constitutive of efforts to sustain peace.

First: family literacy programs provide access to literacy and academic opportunities for adults and children in vulnerable communities in every UN Member State, including economically advanced countries such as the US where there is extreme inequality.⁸

Second: family literacy programs provide a conduit to respond to the challenges identified by families and empower them to overcome the problems negatively impacting their lives (including the trauma of war, the impact of HIV and AIDS, and the plight of refugees and displaced populations).

Third: family literacy programs incorporate in varying configurations the UN Sustainable Development Goals based upon local circumstance and need (including ending poverty and gender equality to life below the water and life on land with peace and justice the overarching principle, tacit or stated, that frames the majority, if not all).

⁷ The following documents provide essential information on the UN architecture for sustain peace and specific information with regard to SDG 16:

UN Security Council [Resolution S/RES/2282](#) (2016): Reviews the UN peacebuilding architecture and introduces the notion of sustaining peace.

UN General Assembly [Resolution A/RES/70/262](#) (2016): Reviews the UN peacebuilding architecture and introduces the notion of sustaining peace.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)16 Data Initiative [2017 Global Report](#) (2017): The SDG16 Data Initiative (SDG16DI) supports the open tracking of progress towards the twelve SDG16 targets. This report assesses global progress towards realizing the 2030 Agenda's commitment to peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

⁸ World Inequality Report 2018, <http://wir2018.wid.world/>

There is no doubt that family literacy is already at the heart of many global peace initiatives and given, that every year one billion children across the globe experience violence, it make eminent sense to locate sustaining peace efforts in in family settings working alongside children’s caregivers to ameliorate the often violent circumstances in which they live their everyday lives. Added to the merits of this proposition is the possibility that family literacy is one of the ways that the UN can stay ahead of potential conflicts, fulfill some of the constitutive necessities for conflict prevention, and participate with people in local communities in sustaining peace initiatives.

In local communities around the world vulnerable people are building webs of caring and compassion that intersect and cross over, creating intricate patterns of hope and possibility for future generations in human societies. This is our common project on which we can all agree – the urgent need to live more peacefully. Every effort should be given to sharing this family literacy peace work with the expressed intent of creating new frameworks of thinking about sustaining peace in human societies, whilst becoming more thoughtful about the unnecessary ravages to human societies caused by the destructive ravages of war.