

Regional Integration and Conflict Prevention

By Lucy Law Webster

On April 9, 2008 the United Nations University launched a World Report on Regional Integration. Published by Springer and edited by Philippe De Lombaerde, this set of papers presents some of the challenges and achievements of a large number of regional and sub-regional organizations.

About 30 UN observers, ambassadors and officials attended the UNU book launch, including some five or six ambassadors from countries in Africa. In all the statements made no one challenged the premise of the UNU Comparative Regional Integration program that regional cooperation and integration have major value.

What impressed me most about the meeting was the warm regard expressed by the African ambassadors for the importance of regional integration and for the European Union as a model. Their statements indicated that each for his own reasons believed that current efforts at sub-regional integration in Africa would gradually lead to more peace and prosperity and to greater integration and more effectiveness for the African Union.

This essay will focus on aspects of regional integration that contribute to conflict prevention; it will not discuss conflict resolution. Although non-military conflict resolution is a process to which various regional organizations aspire, many have thus far primarily undertaken peacekeeping operations using armed forces. This arises in part from the fact that many regional integration efforts focus primarily on economic integration to improve the economic and social welfare of the region.

When Jean Monnet and Conrad Adenauer led the political movement to create the European Coal and Steel Community this was part of a deliberate strategy to meet immediate, recognized needs by cooperation and a pooling of capacities. It was also a deliberate step toward creating institutions that would prevent another European war between France and Germany.

It was predicted that the ECSC would grow and develop additional functions where the maintenance of peace and the prevention of conflict would be integral elements of every other function. The idea of spillover was consciously embraced by the creators of the Coal and Steel Community as was the idea of a transfer of loyalties. Spillover was seen as a natural process where success in one area of regional activity such as the management of coal and steel, would lead to additional areas of coordination and integration. The leaders of the time also expected a transfer of loyalties from the citadel nation state to a multi-state union.

These ideas were consistent with those of Karl Deutsch, who wrote "Political Community at the International Level" and Ernst Hass who wrote, "International Integration: The European and the Universal Process." both viewed the goal of integration to be world community. On the other hand, David Mitrany, who discussed integration with an emphasis on functionalism, did not see the need to create a world community since he saw the diversity of regional communities as optimum. He thought that pluralist, regional, and individual societies already existed and that the purpose of functionalism was to bind these components to work together internationally within a legal framework.

The value of functionalism was sometimes contrasted with the idea of federalism, which put more focus on integration per se as opposed to the practical functions filled by integration. Both concepts and the tensions between them were important to the development of the EU. Another important concept was

the idea of subsidiarity which balanced the push for integration and also contributed to the fact that any political community that stresses subsidiarity is likely to nip many potential conflicts in the bud before they can gain ground. This comes about because a community with decision making as close to the people affected as possible is structured to avoid conflicts inherently.

Jan Tinbergen, who was one of the founders of Economists for Peace and Security and was also active in the European and the world federalist movements, defined subsidiarity as the distribution of decision making in the way that best serves the people closest to the problem in so far as the decisions taken do not impinge on larger groups. If they do, the decision making should be moved to a higher level.

Regional cooperation and integration institutions are designed to prevent conflict before it arises. The idea of prevention is built into the functional operational activities that are the essence of the institution. Here are a few examples from the UN University book referred to earlier.

- In a chapter entitled Western Asia and Arab Region, the book discusses the fact that a Greater Arab Free Trade Area was set up in early 2005 in order to have the WTO exemptions on normal trade barriers that are now allowed for intra-regional trade. The authors also report that some progress was made in Arab economic integration in 2004, but that it had become imperative for Arab countries to strive for further integration “in order to confront the challenges posed by new economic developments, such as the rapid opening up of the world economies and the increasing competition faced by developing countries from the products of large industrialized countries.”
- It also reports that the Arab countries pursued a policy of encouraging investment which included adopting modern investment marketing techniques such as arranging marketing events, conferences, seminars and trade fairs and setting up 43 free trade zones and special industrial zones in seven Arab countries.

In the process of undertaking such cooperative activities, there is little opportunity for conflict between the states within the region. The system tends to prevent conflict by engaging its members in cooperation and healthy competition.

Nonetheless most regional institutions do have structures for conflict resolution. In the EU, its conflict resolution skills and procedures have been used mainly to help countries that want to join the EU untangle themselves from old conflicts in order to qualify for membership.

In Africa, one needs to simply name the various sub-regional efforts to show that there is a great deal of effort being put into cooperation that increases integration and patterns of action that help to preclude interstate conflict:

- The Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), created in 1989, is trying to prepare a common market for Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.
- The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) was set up in 1981 to work toward having a free trade zone for 20 countries in the sub-region.
- The Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) promotes cultural exchange, intra-trade, elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers and the coordination of development programs and industrial projects.

- ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States was set up in 1975 with 15 member states to gradually eliminate tariff barriers within the area and to allow for the freer movement of people within the region.

There are nine additional, similar sub-regional bodies with their own mandates and programs. While it may seem that having so many sub-regional communities must lead to excessive bureaucracy, I would comment that there are advantages in creating bureaucratic jobs and planning experience, especially in Africa where most career training is in the military and opportunities to exercise military skills are very tempting when there are few alternative paths to prestige and prosperity.

At the same time it is well known that there is a great deal of conflict in Africa, most of which is not inter-state conflict, but insurgency and civil wars where different leadership groups vie for power and control of the state machinery. In this context, the development of complex systems of cooperation and integration can lead to healthy non-military forms of competition. From this I conclude that there is no harm in having ample state and inter-state machinery. For many less developed countries and regions the process of planning for integrated development can create important spinoff effects to launch new private production and entrepreneurial activities.

Since she was 17 years old, Lucy Law Webster has been active in the world federalist movement, in the United States, in Britain and Europe and in parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. She sees regional integration as part of a process that can preserve cultural diversity and also lead to a measure of global supranational integration that would be adequate to fulfill the promise of the preamble to the UN Charter. Ms. Webster is a retired United Nations Political Affairs Officer and Executive Director of the Center for War/Peace Studies. She is also a UN Rep. of Economists for Peace and Security and a member of its Board of Directors.