



Interview with Itonde Kakoma

President and CEO, Interpeace*

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Keywords: Interpeace, IHL, peacebuilding, peace making, localization, local ownership, transformation of conflicts, social cohesion, Human rights.



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The first question is about the organization you're currently leading, Interpeace. Could you tell our readers, who may not necessarily all be familiar with Interpeace, about the organization's mandate and how that mandate has evolved over the history of the institution?

Interpeace is marking its 30th anniversary this year. We originally came into existence as the War-Torn Societies Project.

At our origins thirty years ago, the state of the world had some eerie parallels to the state of the world today. Many in the international community were struggling with the inability to respond to the types of crises that were emerging at the time, and as a result formed what was called the War-Torn Societies Project, housed within the United Nations system.

In the intervening years, we have been granted international organization status, and we have a mission that is anchored in a conviction of durable peace rooted in ownership at a national, subnational and local level, to assist communities and States in working out their own solutions to various forms of conflict. At the heart of that is a question of ownership and a fundamental belief that sustainable, more durable peace is ultimately tied to the ownership and inclusive involvement of the very concerned parties who find themselves in circumstances of conflict.

At the same time, while we are mandated to accompany that peacebuilding work, we do so with the belief that more effective peacebuilding is also tied to broader systems at play. And so, we are equally involved in aiding and shaping international peace policy development. These two meet by way of a praxis-informed policy-making which is rooted in the lived experience of communities impacted by various forms of conflict.

So as you know, this interview will appear in an issue that we are publishing on the theme of "International Humanitarian Law and Peace". Can you tell us a bit about what peace means to Interpeace?

The challenge we face is this: the world is seeing considerably more conflict. Data indicates that we have the highest number of armed conflicts since the end of the Second World War. And so, it is clear that there is a real need for peace. At the same time, we also need to be clear about the (changing) nature of conflict within and between States. Central to our understanding of peace is a certainty that, as there is an increased need to pursue peace, we have to get beyond the notion of peace as "the absence of violence". This is critical. We need to start building an enabling environment for impacted communities and individuals, and for those who have the longer-term responsibility and burden to nurture that peace. And we also need to help create environments for them to envision their own path. That is what makes for lasting peace.

I say this in a moment in which we no longer seem to have the political appetite, will or bandwidth to advance more comprehensive transformative

settlements of conflict, and are instead focused on the more narrow cessation of hostilities. That is, without doubt, absolutely critical, but fundamental to our lessons learned over these thirty years is that cyclical forms of conflict will necessarily re-emerge if the root causes of conflict remain unaddressed. Ceasing hostilities alone does not guarantee this.

There's also a psychological component to peace, which has to do with the impact of armed conflict on the psychology of individuals, and individuals within communities, and communities within broader societies. As we look for a vision for peace, we need to take into account the way in which dealing with the past enables the possibility of envisioning a better future.

You mentioned that you are celebrating the 30th anniversary of Interpeace this year. Looking back on those three decades of work, the organization obviously has a track record of many accomplishments and achievements, and it's fair to state that the organization has had an extraordinary impact all around the world. What achievements are you, and is the institution, most proud of?

I would say that the notion of localization for me stands out. I feel convinced that, as an organization, Interpeace has been very much ahead of the curve with regards to the prioritization of a localization agenda, one in which solutions are not imported or imposed, but rather thought of and nurtured locally by the same people living the conflict. This has helped shape the localization agenda in the peacebuilding sector, strengthening the fundamental process of local ownership for lasting and sustainable solutions. I'll give you some examples of the contours of Interpeace's work in this area.

Throughout its history, Interpeace has worked in war-torn societies during a disruption or non-existence of civil society. In certain contexts, this corresponded to the breakdown of State systems, as well as the breakdown of trust. As a result of that combination, we have been entrusted with *accompanying* the nurturing of a more robust civil society, and an imperative entry point is tending to the torn social fabric by prioritizing trust-building. Trust helps individuals and groups remain engaged in the long and arduous process of rebuilding peace, and it is precisely civil society that is entrusted with nurturing the basic elements of State-building. This term – accompaniment – is key to Interpeace's working methods and speaks to our principles of reaching out to all groups, as well as local ownership.

On a more recent mission, for example, after a meeting with senior State officials, I was escorted to the courtyard of the government facilities and shown a building that was put up a few decades ago, and an individual said to me: "You should know that this is the result of the work that your colleagues have done over the years." Interpeace, of course, did not construct that building. What was meant was this: in the absence of the State at a moment of widespread armed conflict and the decimation of the institutions and individuals who were running the State beforehand, Interpeace worked together with individual leaders in society to literally put in place the bricks and mortar of the State-building

process. In doing so, we aided in the consolidation of peace. To this interlocutor, the building served as a visual demonstration of what the dividends of peace can bring about, when thought of and constructed mutually and in a trusting manner.

I also want to highlight how Interpeace as an organization invested heavily in the idea that the design phase of processes is as important as the end result. What do I mean by this? We put as much effort into what needs to be done as in how the process is approached, making sure that it is embedded in constructive dialogue and consensus-building by the broadest number of actors possible. Inclusion is key. There has been a tradition within Interpeace of spending several years in a broad-based, inclusive participatory process, building consensus. In doing so, the organization and its interlocutors create a narrative and, as some colleagues in the Sahel have described it, an autobiography of the State, by way of consulting thousands of individuals at all ranks and levels of society. This process involves identifying those trusted interlocutors who may not call themselves brokers of peace or mediators, but whose trust is enjoyed by various levels – and whose trust has enabled them to serve in those capacities at various times and identify core issues and agendas around which a broader national agenda can be laid out. I highlight this because it also demonstrates a further achievement around long-term commitment, which is another pillar at Interpeace. In many of the places where we work today, we have been privileged to do so for several decades, because we understand that transforming the way a society deals with conflict is a complicated process that is not instantly achievable.

Decades of accompaniment speak to our vision of peace. That vision is not solely tied to an agreement on paper – though peace agreements matter, and have the ability to not only inspire, but also hold to account signatories to move forward in a consensual manner. But long-term accompaniment is an achievement in itself, particularly from the understanding that support of local efforts must be patient and consistent. We cannot take for granted the trust we enjoy by leaders of States, by community representatives, by the international diplomatic corps. To be able to retain this trust over time is, I believe, an expression of our willingness to evolve with an ever-evolving context, and to do so with the understanding that we remain only insofar as we are invited to.

Over the course of our thirty years, we have been – and I use the term deliberately – privileged to aid in the building up of a more robust civil society so as to create more ownership. In that process, we have contributed directly to State-building. And we have furthermore engaged in broad, inclusive, consensus-based dialogue that allows for a country to see itself in a mirror and begin to identify those elements for resilience that can be built upon, but also those elements where there are perhaps fractures in society. Our experience underscores the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts when they are envisioned and led by those directly affected by conflict.

If you'll allow me, I will highlight a further achievement, and that has to do with the way my colleagues have been able over the years to innovatively work with broader actors in the security sector from a collaborative security management point of view.

I was struck by an encounter in my first few months with Interpeace, when meeting with a commander of a region within the Horn of Africa: he said to me very plainly that for years they had attempted to address a situation within their country that was, from their perspective, an internal armed conflict. They were approaching it solely from a military point of view. He described to me the transformative effect of Interpeace's consensus-based approach on how they viewed their role as security actors in that context. This situation speaks loudly to the principle of reaching out to all groups. Marginalization of key groups of society, particularly those overlooked because they are considered difficult to engage with, sows the seeds for renewed violence, deepening resentment and continuing a cycle of undermining the peace process. The commander shared that instead of seeing those who they were fighting as antagonists towards them, they began to view themselves as a part of a broader State system, and they came to see that the system could enable and address root causes of neglect of the population since the country's independence. Those very actors are now participating in community-based local ceasefires, which include provisions around the types of investments required to ensure more durable peace into the future, from schools to roads to water infrastructure.

I'm very proud of that work because it demonstrates the possibility of transformation, even in the midst of cyclical forms of conflict.

Now that we've heard about Interpeace's remarkable achievements, it would be very interesting to hear about the challenges that the organization encounters in its very difficult work – and how it approaches those challenges.

This is a hard question because I think any organization, any individual, working to advance peace at this moment in time is faced with a very stark reality of an increasing prevalence of the use of violence to resolve differences at multiple levels of society. This is a challenge because it is basically asking us as an organization: how do you make a compelling case for peace at a moment when armed conflict, within and between States, is increasing, not decreasing? I think the major challenge for us and for our sector is to go beyond a projectized notion of peace and look for a much longer view of what societal change means with regard to the transformation of conflicts.

Here, I think we are actively struggling with how to pursue an agenda for peace that takes that longer view into account. The challenge here is that even as we have an increase in armed conflicts, we have a decrease in funding – especially with regard to peacebuilding. In other words, we see an increase in armed conflict, yet a decrease in investment around the prevention and resolution of conflict. This is our major challenge, and I believe that to address it will require much more robust, smarter, non-traditional types of partnerships. I believe it will also mean exploring a different set of partners than when we were founded thirty years ago, not only with regard to the role of States, but also with regard to which States are taking more interest in the advancement of peace. We also have to

think about how to responsabilize actors, in a way that benefits from our own hard-won lessons over time, with regard to ensuring a more inclusive agenda. This is true for a variety of issues – with women, peace and security; with youth, peace and security; and arguably also with upholding international norms and law.

We are facing these challenges now, and I'm sure they will persist into the future, as a deconcentration of what power looks like is having a deteriorating effect on trust in, and cooperation through, the traditional international system.

So I believe our challenge is also a responsibility. Number one, if there is an increase in conflict, then I believe our relevance also increases, not decreases. Number two, if there is a shift in the types of actors taking on more leadership roles in advancing questions of peace and security, then I believe we have a responsibility together with our peers to accompany that transition as well, but in a way that is cognizant of the interests and geopolitics at play.

Our next question brings us to the theme of the issue: “International Humanitarian Law and Peace”. International humanitarian law [IHL], as you know, is the branch of public international law that regulates how wars are to be conducted – how belligerents, whether States or non-State armed groups, have to behave – and it’s a system that regulates the relationship between parties that are enemies of each other. How do you conceptualize the relationship between this body of rules and how peace eventually emerges, how peace will be built?

I think this is a fundamental question for our time, not only because of an increase in armed conflicts globally, within States and between States, but also because of the manner in which armed conflict is being carried out. It is absolutely essential for not only parties to the Geneva Conventions but also institutions such as Interpeace to be fully aware of this and, to the best of our ability, make plain that the way war is being carried out has consequences for the quality of peace in the future.

This is not theoretical – it has direct implications, for example, in terms of the way infrastructures in cities, homes and communities are targeted, and the vast destruction we see taking place across cities. And when I look at the statistics and see the images of destruction, what I also see is the destruction of the social fabric, of communities.

And so, we speak of the quality of peace after war being tied to the way those hostilities have been carried out, and to whether the parties do or do not adhere to IHL. Post-war recovery, restoration and rebuilding are not just about the infrastructure – to be sure, infrastructure is crucial, and it has tangible meaning for the post-conflict environment, but the issue goes beyond that. It's also about how the fabric of societies can be ripped apart in a way that is harmful to building lasting peace and that creates an environment, almost inevitably, for cyclical forms of conflict to persist.

As the head of an organization devoted to the pursuit of peace, IHL awareness, knowledge and adherence are key. This is true not only because advocacy around international norms is an important reflection of human values,

but also because if not done, it jeopardizes the possibility of coming out of conflict in a way that lays fertile ground for the advancement of peace after war. Such advocacy helps to re-establish the bonds within societies, particularly in States that have experienced horrific forms of war. It allows future generations to envision and then experience a better way forward.

To build on those comments, you've just talked about how, obviously, the way that war is fought affects the way that peace is built. What about the relationship between how war is fought and the quality of the peace that is built as war ends?

These are two sides of the same coin, in a sense. The way that war is fought has consequences for how societies recover even once war has ended. This is true in tangible ways, for example, when critical infrastructure, health-care facilities, homes, schools and more are damaged during war.

Interpeace's 30th anniversary coincides with a series of major events across the world – including the international community's acknowledgment and commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. That example has direct bearing on your question with regard to how war is fought, as it was the attempted extermination of a group of people, which had implications for the quality of peace that was built thereafter.

What we see as an organization is that in such circumstances of widespread armed conflict, the patience required to build lasting peace is incalculable – and that's especially true when conflict has been so close to home, and when extermination of a group is one of the conflict's goals. It requires a kind of long-run patience – an intergenerational view of time and healing and peace – instead of short-term, projectized cycles of peacebuilding. Breaking cycles involves, for example, educating younger and future generations about what occurred and how to prevent it from recurring. Educating people about IHL can have a supportive effect, providing a preventive mechanism against inhumanity and atrocity should crisis re-emerge.

Digging into the approach of Interpeace when it comes to civilian harm mitigation, what is the relationship between civilian harm mitigation and the support of communities and the fostering of social cohesion?

At Interpeace, we have been looking at this from what we describe as a “peace-responsive” lens, drawing upon lessons of the “conflict sensitivity” and “do no harm” approaches that have underpinned the development and humanitarian sectors. We have aimed at better understanding how we build upon doing no harm and more robust conflict sensitivity, toward actions that have the possibility to contribute in a more deliberate way to peace while protecting the mandates of various actors.

This also has a lot to do with civilian harm mitigation. From our perspective, we asked some basic or foundational questions around this topic. Are

our actions conflict- and gender-sensitive? Are they locally led and based on the agency of individuals within those communities? Is there an understanding of the balance between short-term needs and long-term needs? Are we also looking carefully at the structural drivers of conflict and crisis? These questions are a reminder of how all these themes are interconnected. So, there's an opportunity to look at how our actions persuade conflicting parties to comply with their obligations.

On doing no harm, and on advancing a more peace-responsive approach, some further questions are: do our actions, be they in the development or humanitarian space, have a positive impact on both formal and informal structures of governance vis-à-vis civilians in particular? How can we facilitate conversations that lead to more peace-responsive actions together? This goes back to the consensus-based approach I discussed earlier, too.

All of that said, Interpeace does *not*, in the context of international law and specifically IHL, have a *formal approach* to civilian harm mitigation. It's outside of the scope of our mandate. However, the *spirit* of civilian harm mitigation, especially given the bearing that IHL has on peacebuilding, is significant, particularly when we speak of civilian casualties and damage to civilian objects. In that sense, mitigating civilian harm definitely has a direct bearing on peacebuilding – and not prioritizing civilian harm mitigation can and will rip the social fabric apart.

This gets to the heart of your question, and of our work fostering social cohesion. Education around IHL is part of fostering social cohesion for current and future generations.

One of the things we wanted to ask you about has to do with collaboration. Collaboration among diverse actors is part and parcel of work in humanitarian diplomacy. How has Interpeace approached collaborative work in its efforts to build durable peace?

At its origins, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement was an act of humanitarian diplomacy expressly concerned with the maintenance of peace among peoples and communities. This phrasing – “humanitarian diplomacy” – is increasingly being used by others in light of increasing humanitarian needs. This is also forcing those working to advance peace to be more sensitive to and knowledgeable about the challenges and opportunities within the humanitarian sector.

In the absence of possibilities for brokering more comprehensive settlements to today's conflicts, humanitarian diplomacy at present is still an avenue through which progress is being made. Here, what we have aimed to do at Interpeace is to build upon long-held standards of “do no harm” approaches and of conflict sensitivity. In doing so, we are taking things to another level. We and various humanitarian and development actors are working towards a peace-responsive approach, accompanying various agencies who are not accustomed to using the language of peace in their development or humanitarian actions. We are helping them think through how they are in fact contributing towards the

rebuilding of relations within and between communities in conflict and post-conflict environments. And so this is helping to scale up humanitarian diplomacy, so that the peacebuilding, development and humanitarian sectors are working together toward common goals. When that work is complementary, we have extremely fertile ground on which to put in place those measures that are necessary for more durable solutions, taking into account each actor's own contribution to consolidating peace.

But I must say that humanitarian diplomacy at present stands out more than peace diplomacy at present. Perhaps this is because the former is ultimately clearer about humanity being at the centre of its actions, rather than the oftentimes shorter-term, political interests at play in various peace settlements. This gets at something I have spoken about before, which is the modern tendency to substitute the notion of a ceasefire – a temporary pause in hostilities, often to allow for humanitarian aid to enter, but also for both sides to rearm before hostilities resume – for efforts to advance a permanent solution and build peace. We must be careful to preserve the humanitarian space and the neutrality and impartiality it requires, and that often means advocating for ceasefires to allow for the delivery of humanitarian aid. Still, we must remain fully mindful that there is a responsibility, historically and currently, because of the trust enjoyed by various humanitarian actors to be at the forefront of advancing peace – but that's an extremely delicate balance.

The institutional strategy of the International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC] discusses IHL and peace,¹ and differentiates between two ideas: first, the relationship between IHL and peace, and second, the role of the ICRC when it comes to calling for peace and peacebuilding. What can, should or shouldn't humanitarian agencies do when it comes to peacebuilding? And if they do work to build peace, what are the pitfalls to avoid in order to preserve humanitarian neutrality?

Here I think the state of the world we are in today will require even more courage and a greater risk appetite from the humanitarian sector, mindful that in many environments they are the only third party present. Of course, that comes with a responsibility to maintain neutrality in order to ensure that presence, but also, in the spirit of the very founding of the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, it also brings with it a responsibility to bear witness to human suffering, not as a bystander but as a solution-oriented movement. The trust enjoyed by the constituent parts of

1 “The ICRC firmly emphasizes the inherent connection between IHL, humanitarian principles and peace. It views IHL as an integral part of the broader international legal framework, which is centred on peace. Leveraging its role as a neutral intermediary, the ICRC offers its services and seizes opportunities to promote the humanitarian aspects of conflict prevention as well as conflict or dispute resolution.” ICRC, *ICRC Strategy 2024–2027*, 14 December 2023, available at: www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/Activities/icrc_institutional_strategy_2024-2027.pdf (all internet references were accessed in August 2024).

the Movement, namely the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the IFRC and the ICRC, must be preserved and in no way compromised.

I think the ICRC stands out for its ability to serve as a neutral and impartial intermediary that allows for parties to a conflict to acknowledge the protected emblem and to use the ICRC as a means to engage directly with each other. That is a treasured, coveted space that should be upheld. But doing so comes with greater risk and greater scrutiny in certain ways, and especially in the absence of more effective channels for peace, diplomacy and international cooperation. This thus implies a greater burden on humanitarian actors to provide solutions that are ultimately also political in nature. That's a very delicate balance, and there is no perfect solution. The issue is highly contextual and requires a careful assessment of where and how the trusted neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian action can be used without being seen as a replacement for addressing the fundamental challenges that bring about conflicts to begin with.

At the end of the day, this is not a challenge for the humanitarian sector – it is a challenge for leaders of States and groups, and for other international organizations that have a mandate to advance peace and security. But because of the state of the world, various international agencies are being reminded of their origins and their very statutes and how their work was originally envisioned as a contribution to peace and security. In the case of the World Health Organization, for example, the founding statutes say that the treatment of health contributes to the maintenance of international peace and security.² The International Labour Organization's statutes explain that the dignified right to work is a further contribution to international peace and security.³ Those links have perhaps not been made as explicit in recent decades, but because of the times we are facing, organizations are compelled to remind themselves of that bigger role around international cooperation and their contribution to peace and security. And this is true for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, as well. At the 20th International Conference in Geneva, the Movement spoke plainly of the principle of humanity as being born of a desire to bring lasting peace amongst all peoples.⁴

2 “The health of all peoples is fundamental to the attainment of peace and security and is dependent upon the fullest co-operation of individuals and States.” Constitution of the World Health Organization, 1946, Preamble, available at: <https://apps.who.int/gb/bd/PDF/bd47/EN/constitution-en.pdf?ua=1>.

3 “Whereas universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice; And whereas conditions of labour exist involving such injustice, hardship and privation to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperilled; ... The High Contracting Parties, moved by sentiments of justice and humanity as well as by the desire to secure the permanent peace of the world, and with a view to attaining the objectives set forth in this Preamble, agree to the following Constitution of the International Labour Organization.” Constitution of the International Labour Organization, 1919, Preamble, available at: <https://tinyurl.com/uatdt557>.

4 “The Red Cross, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours – in its international and national capacity – to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, co-operation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.” 20th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, “Proclamation of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross”, 1963, available at: <https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/S0020860400011311a.pdf>.

So yes, that balance needs to be upheld, but not in a way that shies from responsibility, especially when given such extraordinary trust almost universally.

This last question is an open-ended one. We just want to give you a chance to say anything else you'd like to share with our readers that hasn't been covered yet.

You know, there is a peculiar phrase that stands out to me, penned by our Governing Board, which is that I, as President of Interpeace, should aim to be an “ambassador of peace”. I see that as aspirational – and also as a kind of moral responsibility at this moment in time. We must all be ambassadors of peace.