



Opening of the Geneva Peace Week

Sustaining Peace and the Role of Democracy: A Swiss Perspective

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Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to **welcome** you all to the Geneva Peace Week and to be part of the opening of an event, which has become a valued annual tradition that is high on our agenda. The event has gained a lot in scope and influence and highlights the role of Geneva as a key place for peace.

As we all witness a multiplication of conflicts in the world, we feel the **urgency for peace**. That we need to increase our focus to prevent violent conflict and to invest long-term in peace is obvious.

When I studied the program of the Peace Week, I was impressed by the **broad range of topics**, including, for instance, migration policy or the socio-economic contribution. It reflects that peacebuilding today is more open than ever to reach beyond its traditional boundaries in order to face the many challenges ahead. The events that especially caught my eye were the ones on Peacebuilding in Europe, on the question of Truth and Trust and on Gender.

Switzerland supports the UN's approach of **Sustaining Peace**, aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict. This includes a strong focus on national ownership. We must consolidate peace where it already exists. We must strengthen structures, attitudes, and institutions securing peace. We should not only address the root causes of conflict, but also look at the positive drivers for peace, and in this way strengthen prevention efforts. The negotiation of codes of conduct for political parties and election candidates facilitated by Switzerland in different countries, such as Georgia, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, is an example of a concrete prevention tool, which will be addressed in an event tomorrow.

In the same spirit, the **Sustainable Development Goals** recognize that peace, human rights, inclusive democratic institutions and development are mutually reinforcing.

Sustaining Peace is about inclusion: we must build a **common vision of society**. We must take into account the needs of all segments of the population.

But how can we build a common vision of society, when we witness, at the same time, **fragmentation**, a lack of trust and a lack of cohesion in our modern societies? How can we build inclusive societies, when the public debate becomes more divisive and ideological, when social groups confront each other, when hate speech on the Internet and social media incites violence - as is increasingly the case in the run-up to elections?

I will try to find some answers. The **Swiss experience** and our democratic tradition may be helpful.

Whereas in many countries voters are increasingly critical towards democracy, become frustrated and have less confidence in national political institutions, the situation in Switzerland is different. Although political positions have become more polarized, **confidence and satisfaction with the government and parliament in Switzerland remain high** and have even increased over the last few years. Satisfaction with democracy in general is a strong determinant of political trust.

Switzerland has an unusual, consensus-oriented **political system**. Parties ranging from left to right are part of the government, the Federal Council. Voters have a direct say on policy issues in referendums and regularly vote on citizens' proposals. People vote up to four times a year, either by letter or at the ballot box on the day of the vote.

Democracy is not only a form of governance, it goes hand in hand with a certain culture and spirit: with the dispute over the better argument, with respect for the opponent, with the willingness to accept changing majorities and defeats. Democracy, and in particular elections, provide avenues to prevent and manage conflicts peacefully.

Based on our political culture, I see **three key requirements** for the development of a common vision of society for lasting peace:

First, we have to listen. Only if people have a voice and are able to **effectively participate in the political process**, can they contribute to a common vision. Civil society needs support and empowerment, under-represented and vulnerable groups must be included. Contradictions and diverging perceptions must be part of a constructive dialogue. Instead of confrontation, we reach consensus or compromise.

Second, we have to protect individuals' rights. The **rule of law and respect of human rights** are key for a peaceful society. When my dignity and fundamental human rights are protected then I am free to express my opinion and participate in public affairs without fear. Human rights violations are not only a result of crisis and conflict, but are themselves at the very root of conflicts.

Third, people must have options and be adequately informed about them. We should **anticipate new developments**. In the face of radical technological advances, we must define which regulation we need when. The velocity, virality and anonymity of information flow in the Internet and on social media, the impact of the fourth industrial revolution and artificial intelligence, the cyber dimension of conflicts – they all require innovative forms of handling.

Just two weeks ago, Swiss citizens elected their Parliament. It was a historic election. People showed with their vote that they care for the environment, they asked for a **climate-friendly policy**. They voted for women - women's share in congress rose from 32% to over 42% - and they voted for younger people.

The mobilization for these issues was unprecedented: A climate strike took place in September. This started earlier: When people realized that **glaciers** in Switzerland had shrunk around 10% in the past 5 years - a rate never seen before in over a century - they did not stay frustrated and passive, but started to act.

When progress on **gender equality** stagnated, women decided not just to wait. This year, in June, we saw a nationwide strike, where thousands of women – and also men - took to the streets and protested against deep-rooted inequalities. It was a peaceful protest and it united people from all ages and different political backgrounds. It showed the potential for real social change. So, people wanted change and created change, made possible because there is trust, participation, inclusion and respect for the right to initiate change.

The necessity to find a common interest is also at the center of **global politics**. Global challenges require global responses and cooperation. Multilateralism matters. Not only states have to act. Civil society, the academia, the business community: You should all be part of our common efforts to analyze problems, to define strategies and policies, and to implement them.

It is in this spirit that we meet this week. The **Geneva Peace Week** expands the space for building peace and resolving conflict through dialogue and negotiation. I am confident that the debates and exchanges will drive innovation and change to prevent violent conflict and sustain peace. Lessons learned here in Geneva will serve as a meaningful contribution to the upcoming UN Peacebuilding Architecture Review. This Review will, hopefully, show ways to increase UN peacebuilding capacities, by convening and harmonizing the efforts of all relevant peace and development actors both within and outside the UN system.

To conclude, I would like to underline that the Geneva Peace Week would not be possible without the work of **Achim Wennmann and his team**. I would like to thank you, as well as UNOG and the Graduate institute, the other two facilitators of the Geneva Peace Week, for your time and energy. I would also like to thank the partners who are essential to the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform: the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding of the Graduate Institute, the Geneva Center for Security Sector Governance, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Interpeace, and the Quaker UN Office in Geneva.

Let me wish you all a very inspiring week. And with reference to the honoured Mahatma Gandhi, whose granddaughter is here with us today – let us create together the societies where people can be the change they want to see!