

# **Entrepreneurship for Peace**

*Thursday 19 November  
Room XII,  
Palais des Nations, Geneva,*

## **Opening speech**

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The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNCTAD.

In the last few years the world has seen a sharp rise in conflict, with a commensurate increase in the number of people affected. The refugees fleeing war-torn regions are part of a community of almost 60 million displaced people globally – the largest number of involuntary migrants the world has witnessed since the Second World War.

A series of other challenges, such as unemployment, particularly among youth, dwindling natural resources, and the threat of climate change can act as additional triggers for conflict. This complex web poses a serious challenge as the international community gears up to fight poverty and build shared global prosperity under the Sustainable Development Goals.

It is therefore pertinent that one of the SDGs – goal number 16 – is entirely devoted to the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, with a range of specific targets dedicated to tackling the particular ills that stir up conflict and violence.

Conflict goes hand in hand with poverty. After civil war, incomes are on average 15 per cent lower than if war had not taken place, while absolute poverty in afflicted regions increases by as much as 30 per cent. A range of other indicators also tends to worsen during conflict: food production declines, external debt increases and exports drop.

Systematic, balanced efforts to bring inclusive development to regions and communities are one of the best ways to prevent conflict. Such efforts must seek to uplift and improve the conditions of everyone, because it is only through shared economic growth that peace can prosper.

Entrepreneurship is an important piece of the puzzle to create conditions that will bring stability to communities and foster peace. It is widely acknowledged that small and medium enterprises are powerful vehicles to support economic growth. They are also key drivers of job creation. SMEs can contribute to reduce poverty and inequality, and empower women and youth groups. And because these firms often spring up in locations shunned by mainstream business, they offer opportunities to and accommodate the needs of disenfranchised communities. Through these efforts SMEs can play an important role to reduce the discontent and despair associated with economic marginalization, thus positioning them as compelling potential peace brokers.

A vibrant enterprise sector can forge bonds of collaboration and partnership between parties across political divides. Successful entrepreneurial endeavour enables conflicting sides to cooperate commercially, creating jobs and wealth for both sides, and provides a meaningful counterbalance to the tension brought by unemployment and lack of opportunity. It is such ties, forged through collaborative commercial activity, that are the surest way to cure conflict. But there is also a new type of entrepreneur today that works directly to combat the causes and effects of conflict and violence. Social enterprises have virtually exploded in recent years, reaching out and innovating to bring positive social change to communities. These activities are often deployed to alleviate conditions in conflict-torn regions. Sometimes innovations are used to literally combat the destructive aspects of war. Most often the work has a social dimension, aimed to help victims of war recover and build new lives, by rebuilding human capital and reversing social exclusion. The activities of these peace-building social enterprises cover a wide spectrum and their benefits can broadly be grouped in three categories: first, the creation of jobs and inclusive opportunities for affected people; second, the provision of innovative services where normal service operations have been disrupted, and third, the provision of public goods where governments are unable to do so. Later this afternoon we will hear from some social entrepreneurs who have made contributions to peace-building in their societies in this manner. We hope their stories will inspire others to emulate their models to help end violence and conflict in other parts of the world.

It is their nimbleness and ability to swiftly adapt and react to changes and challenges in societies that make SMEs such powerful allies in efforts to promote peace and stability in the world. And it is for this reason that UNCTAD runs a comprehensive work programme dedicated to entrepreneurship development, covering the entire spectrum of enterprise support – from policymaking and institution building, to direct capacity-building for entrepreneurs through its Empretec programme, and building business and other network linkages. UNCTAD intends to fortify these efforts through meaningful partnerships to match growing global social challenges.

As part of these efforts UNCTAD has been an active organizer of the Global Entrepreneurship Week in Geneva since 2010, together with the University of Geneva, Genilem, the Confederation of Enterprises and WIPO. This year we have partnered with the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform to bring today's symposium, dedicated to exploring the important contribution entrepreneurship can make to build peace.

I am pleased to give the floor now to the moderator, Dr. Achim Wennmann, who is the Executive Coordinator of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform and I wish you successful deliberations today.