

“Making the world a safer place”

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By *Ehab Shanti*



Kathleen Cravero

Dr. Kathleen Cravero is the fairly new Director and Assistant Administrator of UNDP’s Bureau of Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR). One says fairly new, because while it seems like she has held this post for a decade, she has only been in it for the past 8 months. Yet she has considerable experience in this area of development work. This experience proved most useful when Cravero, in her very first days on the job, had to deal with the tsunami and the crisis in Sudan.

Cravero was born in the United States, where she attained a diploma in French and Philosophy, achieving top academic honours, and then joined UNICEF in a variety of capacities. (The title of “Dr.” before her name refers to the PhD in political science that she attained while at UNICEF.) When she realized in the midst of her career that dealing with world health issues was her vocation, Cravero attained enrolled in a Masters programme in Public Health at Columbia university.

In addition to UNICEF, she has since served in other UN agencies, including WHO and UNAIDS, in Burundi, Uganda and Chad as well as Geneva and New York. Her most recent post before joining UNDP was as Deputy Director of UNAIDS; in that role she traveled to some 50 countries.

Talking to Cravero one gets a sense of the pragmatism that permeates in her thinking—an almost methodical if not chilled one-two-three approach to what needs to be done. Yet scratching below the surface one finds a solid idealist behind the shell of realism; this was apparent in her answer when asked to identify her biggest challenge: “making the world a safer place, but also safer for those who work to make it safer.”

Having survived an ambush early in her career in Burundi in which she saw two of her close colleagues shot in cold blood, as they stood against the wall next to her, before she ran in the jungles for three hours to reach safety, these words are not just the newspeak of a talking head, but a deep reflection of a profound lifelong quest.

As one sits with Cravero one is struck by the depth of her strategic outlook and thinking, which is somewhat veiled in her down to earth and unassuming demeanor. Joseph Conrad, the great novelist who often identified characters in his novels with their eyes, would have had a field day describing intelligence that Cravero’s big blue eyes exudes. This is a woman who has a vision and a plan for how to get there, Conrad might have written.

“She has an almost unique ability to see quickly to the core of a problem and to offer two or three commonsensical solutions. Add to this a deft human touch that attracts people’s attention, making her a very captivating speaker,” describes one of her colleagues.

When asked questions about what needs to be done for crisis recovery, she almost switches into an automatic no nonsense mode. “Well, first of all, recovery must start at the same time as relief,” she says. Sounds simple, but the implications are great. Whenever a major world crisis ensues it normally dominates headlines, stimulating the international community to respond immediately

with relief. But according to Cravero, once the interest is gone, this area is often left to its own devices, with no adequate resources for the recovery to begin, creating an almost permanent crisis. So, Cravero asks the simple question why should recovery not commence immediately with the relief, so as to strategically ensure that we harness the momentum of global attention and set the affected area on the right footing.

Another element of strategic thinking is to plan in advance and set adequate resources for areas of possible risk, looking at the root causes of the problem, not its symptoms. A case in point that Cravero sheds light on is apparent instability in Guyana, where a major root cause of the problems seemed to revolve around the elections. Thus, by assisting in offering a free and fair elections, according to Cravero, one can help reduce the risk of crisis. As Cravero explains, "We need to calculate the risk of a crisis, and mitigate its possibility of happening."

As another one of her colleagues attests, Cravero's strategic outlook is not just about sitting on a desk and pontificating about strategy, on the contrary "she is a hands on, in the field type or person." "She has complemented the work of regional bureaus with a wealth of knowledge and contacts; I have seen first hand how she was able to mobilize them to generate resources and assistance through her dynamism, energy and inspirational leadership" adds her colleague.

So, what are the ingredients of the recipe for success in crisis prevention and recovery does the strategic chef offer? Well, several things.

First, cross-sector and "inter-agency cooperation are essential, because the crisis has many facets," Cravero suggests. "We cannot focus just in peace building, and ignore that conflicts have a social and economic element to them" she adds. Cravero should know, because as the Deputy Director of UNAIDS, she witnesses an unprecedented level of cooperation in fight against AIDS that pooled the resources and knowledge of myriad international and UN system organizations including, the World Bank, ILO, UNDP, WHO, WFP, UNHCR and UNESCO. For Cravero, this partnership is not only essential in crisis prevention (in this case it is the AIDS crisis), but that "it shows that we're not only telling people to do business differently, we're actually doing business differently ourselves."

The second element in Cravero's recipe of success is to identify and focus on the challenges not only of crisis prevention, but also of sustainable solutions that ensure crisis does not happen again. Consider for instance the notions of Disarmament, Demobilization and Re-integration (DDR). Cravero learnt from first hand experience that disarmament and demobilization can be relatively easy, but for resolution of the crisis to be sustainable the focus needs to be on reintegration "which is the toughest." She has witnessed areas in which many of the rebels began their murderous careers at the age of 8, and having lost their childhoods became lean and mean killing machines by the age of 16. "The challenge is how can we re-integrate those who were doing the amputations into the communities whose limbs they used to amputate," says Cravero. Thus, for her, there has to be a well thought out plan to rehabilitate both the victims and victimizers, and to establish a framework of re-integration and development.

The third element in the recipe is "to share the global expertise, while building the indigenous capacity" Cravero proposes. On this she provides a paradigmatic example of a key part of UNDP's mission: to build a global development network of knowledge and expertise.