

# **Just Wasting Our Time?**

**An Open Letter to Peacebuilders**

**Simon Fisher and Lada Zimina**

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## An open letter to peacebuilders

Dear friends,

Greetings. If your work and interest is focussed on peaceful change, this letter is for you. You may be working in one of many fields: development, rights, community relations, the environment perhaps, or you may be working directly for peace. You may use a variety of terms to express your work, be that conflict sensitivity, peacebuilding, conflict transformation or social change. We would like to share a deep concern with you.

The two authors of this letter are from different generations, and different parts of the world. We both began working in this field with high hopes. We joined up through our commitment to social and political transformation. We believed that it offered a place where vision, values and practice could come together. Peacebuilding, we thought, was about far-reaching change in the way the world works in order to reduce violence in all its forms and promote wellbeing through nonviolent methods of resolving conflicts.

We are responding now to the voices and views of colleagues and partners we have worked with in different parts of the world, many of whom work with local groups or organisations and who have raised, and written about, a good number of the issues set out here. Often these colleagues are involved in funding partnerships with civil society organisations from the 'global North' and do not feel free to voice the questions raised about the role of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). When they do they are often not sure they are heard.

We believe there is, at this moment, a window of opportunity for transformative peacebuilding to come of age, to be taken seriously by governments, social movements and business alike, as major crises continue to resist military solutions and global environmental constraints combine to throw up intractable new conflicts.

The post-election events in Kenya in early 2008 have demonstrated the power and imagination of civil society when it is mobilised and well led. However, for all their achievements, many in today's community of peacebuilders remain deeply unclear about what they are aiming to do. Few practitioners or thinkers seem to be willing to look at peacebuilding in the wider context, and to address some of the apparent contradictions. Peacebuilding, as an activity of civil society, is in danger of missing the opportunity and becoming irrelevant to real change, both local and global. It is no surprise that a recent seminar of peace workers in the Balkans was entitled: 'Are we just nice people wasting our time?'

Many INGOs, including those working on development and humanitarian assistance, demonstrate confusion about their role in relation to peace, which infects their policymaking and often leads them to settle for an ineffective, minimalist approach. If they could resolve this uncertainty their work would, we believe, have a much greater and more lasting impact. So while this paper may bring some unsettling questions, we hope that it also has the potential to make their lives easier by providing a stimulus for this process and some signposts along the way.

In the paper we trace how many activists in the peacebuilding field no longer own the vision which inspired the first pioneers of this field, and have settled for what we are calling a 'technical' approach to dealing with conflict, in contrast to the 'transformative' approach which characterised the field at its inception. While the technical approach may provide practical solutions to immediate problems, and incidentally enable the growth of many international and local organisations to deliver them, it does not address the underlying social system and

dynamics. In many cases peacebuilding as currently practised serves to reinforce the way the world works, which can be characterised (forgive the jargon, and the oversimplification) by two phrases: geopolitical hegemony and globalised business – at the expense of the planet and the wellbeing of most of its inhabitants, including humans. Many peace workers are thus unintentionally living a lie, colluding in a world order which is inherently unjust, unsustainable and destructive. Have they – we – lost the sense of whose peace needs to be built?

The paper points also to other, related weaknesses which undermine the impact of peacebuilding, including an undue deference to political and economic power (which allows for frequent co-option), an endemic lack of cooperation across civil society, and a severe shortage of activist practitioners who combine the experience and skill necessary to address complex conflicts.

What is to be done? We hope that this will be the subject of many conversations. The outcomes will hopefully be many and rich. For ourselves, we see the possibility of work on at least two levels simultaneously: first, an initiative within global civil society to develop and promote a set of best advice and principles, stemming from a distillation of global practice, for the peaceful resolution of violent conflict and its underlying causes, which can then be used to lobby for change with governments and business alike. In this, a widely inclusive process will be critical. At the same time we would encourage the peacebuilding community, and in particular the INGO sector, to organise itself to become a more effective resource to drive such change. For this, peacebuilders will need to go beyond their comfort zone to rediscover their vision and relevance in today's world of multiple, interconnected threats to wellbeing. We believe this is likely to lead to much closer integration with the work of others, especially those who are addressing the key, linked global issues of economic injustice, environmental destruction and oppression (denial of rights and participation). It will hopefully lead to a more systematic integration of transformative elements into every activity and programme, from the smallest to the largest. Such change will require a willingness to network more wholeheartedly, and to develop new partnerships. It will also necessitate a willingness by peacebuilders to take their own power seriously, and use it. It will require a commitment to action learning at all levels and the development of new opportunities.

As you would expect from practitioners, this letter has a very practical objective: to galvanise actors in this and related fields to rediscover the vision and relevance of peacebuilding and conflict transformation, to press for, and embody, well-articulated changes, at home as well as elsewhere, and back up a convincing discourse with a willingness both to pressurise and deliver. The letter comes largely from a practice base, and needs to be challenged and further developed from other perspectives. It reflects the inevitably limited experience of the authors. We welcome all suggestions. Where we have offended please forgive us: it is not intentional.

We believe that there has never been a better time to challenge the notion that violence and warfare 'work', in the sense of delivering the anticipated goals, whether as terrorism or state military interventionism. There has never been a more opportune moment to demonstrate the power of alternative methods of handling conflicts in order to build peace with justice.

Please take time to read and discuss the paper with colleagues. It can be downloaded from the website [www.lettertopeacebuilders.ning.com](http://www.lettertopeacebuilders.ning.com). We invite you to write to [lettertopeacebuilders@gmail.com](mailto:lettertopeacebuilders@gmail.com) with your comments. Would you would be interested in taking some of this thinking further, and turning aspects of it into action?

Simon Fisher and Lada Zimina

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## About the authors

**Simon Fisher** is an independent facilitator, trainer and writer. He has first-hand experience of conflict, development and change in many countries, working with local and international agencies, governments and at the UN. In 1991 he founded and became the first director of Responding to Conflict, since when his priority has been to help develop and sustain active networks of committed peace workers at global and regional levels, as well as to support specific initiatives for peace and justice. Among his books are: *Working with Conflict: Skills and Strategies for Action*, RTC / Zed Books 2000 (co-author), and *Spirited Living: Waging Conflict, Building Peace*, Quaker Books 2004.

**Lada Zimina** is a practitioner from Kazakhstan, with experience of working regionally in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and on a wider international scale. She has focussed on critical issues in peacebuilding such as security and small arms control, contested histories, business interests and resource management policies, and peace and conflict education. She is especially interested in building the capacity of civil society to deal with conflict, and in exploring the linkages between development and conflict transformation. She is a former Chevening scholar.