

Whose Peace, Whose Building?

**Keynote address by Simon Fisher to the Asia Peacebuilders Forum
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1. Coming of age

Friends, greetings. How wonderful it is to see all these familiar faces, and equally wonderful to see all the new – to me – faces... It is exhilarating to be here with such experienced and wise colleagues and to able spend some time with you, to share ideas and experience and inspirations. And to do so in Nepal, of all places, a country which, in the process of its transition, is gaining much from, and contributing a great deal to, the insights and expertise of peacebuilders everywhere. And in this region of the world where the constituency of peacebuilders is growing and becoming stronger all the time. Witness the numbers of us here. Peacebuilding is coming of age, coming to maturity. We can, we will celebrate our growth and development and enjoy our successes. We are going to have fun here. And as is the way with us, we will be looking to the future: we will have lots of bright ideas, share them in myriad conversations, make plans, develop new projects. It is right and necessary to do that. We are busy people with lots to do and never enough time.

In this talk I want to set out briefly and celebrate some of what I see as our successes as a community and as a field. I want then to put this in the context of the way the wider world seems to be going. And this will lead me to ask some questions, of us all, about where we are and where we are going. All in 45 minutes, or thereabouts. Can you stay with me for that time?

And before I start I need to acknowledge the obvious: that I am an outsider to this region. Please take what I say with a pinch of salt. I am offering my thoughts, based on my experience, in the hope that they will be useful to you, with yours. Lets see if they are.

Now, as I begin, lets pause for a moment. Lets be fully present: to be in the here and now. That is after all the only moment there is. Let's stop thinking for a moment, close our eyes and simply listen: Be aware of our selves, your thoughts, bodies, the movement and the warm life within. Listen. And now can we open our eyes and move outwards, to the others in the room. Notice each one of us. Now, we are fully present here. It feels good, strong. But what about all our colleagues who are not here, but part of our networks and teams. Lets bring them here too, in solidarity. We are many and we are strong.

It feels good, strong. It is amazing in fact. You know, we could not have done something as ambitious as this 10, or even 5 years ago. We have come a long way in a short time. We have built a lot of peace (can you say that? Maybe it should be “pieces”). Looking back over the past few years, I wonder what single aspect excites you most about how civil society peacebuilding has developed?

Would you point to the growth of NGOs, for example? When I started working on peace issues, 25 years ago really, there was, or seemed to be, very little, happening in civil society. Now, there are innumerable organisations working on peace and conflict world-wide.

1. You might want to single out the countless **organisations and groups working within their own societies**, doing whatever it takes to reduce violence and develop new ways of working on injustice and conflict. They do reconciliation, mediation, nonviolent action, they campaign, they set up peace zones, you name it - and they often do not, and don't need to. Thanks to them – you – it has become clear that the big picture cannot be transformed without “bottom-up” changes at community level. Lasting change has to come from within. Nepal is an excellent example of this.

2. OR you might focus on what I can only call a surge(!) of **international agencies**: many are working on single issues, such as arms reduction, war children, peace education or trauma healing, peace for one day and so on. Others are running comprehensive, multilevel programmes in hot-spots around the world. Add to them the many development organisations that have taken on aspects of our agenda, especially it seems the “Do No Harm” approach and its companion, conflict sensitivity.

Yes, we can make a strong case for NGOs.

3. OR would you point to the remarkable increase in **civil-based movements** which have achieved regime change with minimal or no violence. The Philippines, Ukraine, Serbia, Georgia are some examples of the large number where dramatic change has taken place, driven by popular indignation and local organisational skills – with ifs and buts of course. You might squeeze South Africa in there too, or Northern Ireland.

4. OR would you draw attention to the **intellectual base**? We have so many creative thinkers and writers. There is a mass of universities teaching peace studies and related subjects. And thinktanks. And think of all the methods of participatory analysis and intervention we have devised, all the courses we have run. No need to mention names, but I forgive me if I mention ACTS as one pioneer amongst many.

5. OR does **mainstreaming** get you? Would you emphasise the way much of our thinking has been taken up into government, mainly “western” policies. Do No Harm has been a big hit there. Would you prioritise, at UN level, the Peacebuilding Commission which is potentially a crucial channel for the voice of global civil society to reach into global intergovernmental thinking.

6. OR is it our **networks** which get you most excited? No need to mention names...except perhaps Action Asia, which itself is part of the global Action for Conflict Transformation with fellow regional networks in Africa, Central and South America.

OR would you point to them all, and more besides. You never know with peace workers. Very unpredictable people.

There are so many examples, here and elsewhere of the way in which people are organising and intervening effectively for peace. We will surely learn much and celebrate the achievements of Nepalese civil society in helping bring about the peace we have here now. We could talk and sing of the Concerned Citizens for Peace in Kenya which held the nation when the politicians were locked in combat, both verbal and, for their followers, physical and helped it through to the relative peace they have now, the “politicians peace” as they call it there. I hope there will be time for these stories to be told here.

Yes, we are making a difference – from grassroots to government and inter-governmental levels.

And a critical aspect of all that has been that we have become hugely better, more professional at the detail of our work, at the technical aspects. Security sector reform, for example, dialogue, negotiation, mediation, peace processes, demobilisation, disarmament, reconciliation, trauma healing, you name it. The list goes on. We have become specialists, and we have needed to.

But – and this is a big but – I wonder if we are in danger of missing something crucial in this advance? And by ‘we’ I mean us in this room, largely civil society international and national/local. I believe we are, and the clue to that lies in looking again at the wider context in which we are living and working.

2. The bigger picture

What is really going on out there, behind all the clamour and noise? What can we hear? Are we listening?

The first thing I hear, really hear, is the sound of weeping. And when I look I see people suffering pain, separation and alienation: people from people, people from the planet.

Let me sketch a quick picture of what we might call global society for you, or rather a picture of the trends which have shaped today and continue to shape tomorrow, for this is the context in which you, in this region, are working.

Experienced observers, as they say, among them my good friend Professor Paul Rogers of the Peace Studies Department at Bradford University, agree that there are at least three very striking trends: socio-economic divergence, environmental destruction and militarisation.

I will take them one at a time.

Socio-economic divergence. With the benefit of the past few months of credit crunch and crisis, if we did not know it before, it is quite plain that the global economic system is dominated completely by the market economy. It has become so especially since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Even China has moved in that direction. As a result there has been economic growth in many areas of the world, but there are two critical points:

- Firstly much of the world has not enjoyed this growth, including most of sub-Saharan Africa, parts of the Middle East and South Asia and significant parts of the former Soviet Union.
- Second, and more crucially, even where economic growth is occurring it is not delivering socio-economic justice. It is benefiting about one fifth of the global population, rather more than a billion people and the remaining 5.5 billion are falling further behind all the time. And the gap is widening all the time. One or two statistics to keep you awake and counting: in 1960 the average GNP per capita for the richest 20% of the world's population was thirty times that of the poorest 20%. By 1995 this had widened to sixty times. By 2000, the richest 10% of the world – who are widespread now, not just in the global north - owned 85% of household wealth whereas the poorest 50% owned barely 1% of the wealth.¹

In all this the very poorest, the bottom billion as they are sometimes called, are getting poorer in real terms as well as relatively. While they are present in many poor societies, they are concentrated largely in Africa and Asia: in this region we are including a good number of countries Laos, Cambodia, Burma, the landlocked countries of Central Asia, North Korea, Nepal...

What are the effects of this ever widening gap? You see it all the time: marginalisation, deepening poverty, ill-health, crime and insecurity, and a desperate urge for migration – or, on the part of the rich states, for the restriction of immigration. Often armed resistance occurs, as here in Nepal for example and in China, and India with Naxalite groups now operating in a third of its states.

And added to this is the second dynamic.

Environmental Destruction. The world is running out of resources for growth, and growth itself is destroying the environment and the climate.

While all of us know, more or less, about the impact of climate change, we may not be aware how devastating its effects are likely to be on the economically weaker tropical and sub-tropical regions. Perhaps the worst of these, beyond rising sea levels and severe storms, is the drying out of the tropical and subtropical regions.

It looks as if those parts of the world where most of the world's population lives, and where populations are growing, are likely to lose rainfall drastically over the next 30-40 years, when the population of these regions is already set to increase substantially. This has the potential to be catastrophic, leading to terrible suffering, anger and inevitably massive pressures for migration.

This drying out is hitting hardest on many of those regions already suffering the greatest economic impoverishment: our bottom billion again if you like.

¹ Rogers, Paul. "Why We're Losing the War on Terror", Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden MA, 2008, Chapter 7. The material in this chapter underpins much of this section.

These trends, both socio economic and environmental have been developing over at least 40 years or so and show no signs of change.

Largely in response to these, the third trend I want to draw attention to is **militarisation**. Many governments, well aware of these economic and environmental trends, have responded in control mode, mostly out of perceived self-defence. They have not delivered a peace dividend, as was hoped when the Wall came down. Instead, in most cases they have maintained or increased military expenditure and developed a more flexible capacity for military response. In the face of these threats their response has been what Paul Rogers calls: liddism, or taming the jungle.

The bulk of the world's rich elite are therefore pulling up the trap door. They have securitised - horrible word - the world's problems, instead of addressing them. In the rich countries they have put up ever stronger barriers against immigration - of the wrong kind of person of course. The important thing for them, understandably if tragically, seems to be to maintain their wealth and control - by the use if necessary of overwhelming force, rather than address the problems themselves. In this language words change: development is replaced by stabilisation, peace by security.

The so-called war on terror forms part of that of course. A fearsome international enemy is created - currently Al Qaeda - and the war on Iraq justified in that context, even though no Al Qaeda activity was taking place there. People everywhere are frightened into giving up their freedoms. In the UK as elsewhere human rights are gradually restricted: just now the authorities are trying to pass a law making it legal to track every email, every text, every phone call of any person, whenever they wish. And that is on top of a system of surveillance cameras across the country second to none.

In this way people's participation in their futures is progressively reduced, and the rules of global order rewritten to suit. Hamas can win an election in Palestine, thus proving it is democratic, but it is boycotted by the West because it is "Islamist". International agencies working in Palestine have to give personal and passport details of those they are working with to their government funders.

So why is this happening? Who is responsible? We can discuss it. Maybe it is simply the outcome of the free market taken to its logical conclusion.

If you read Naomi Klein's book *The Shock Doctrine*², you will get a well researched thesis that points to global corporations intertwined with state elites. She sees them as dominating the way the world works, in close association with "Western" governments. They can make and break currencies, shape individual perceived needs and the policies of whole countries in a host of carrot and stick ways. It is their profits and wellbeing that dictate the way many governments behave. Look at the so called credit crunch, and how ordinary people have been made to get rich business and finance out of a hole of their own making.

² Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Allen Lane, 2007.

If you have seen Michael Moore's film *The Corporation* you will have a similar take. The film uses psychological diagnostic criteria to compare the "personality" of the corporate "person", mainly in the US, to that of a clinically-diagnosed psychopath. It won't surprise you that there are many similarities.

You don't have to buy into all the argumentation to see that some of the most powerful institutional actors in our world are not democratically accountable: their interests do not coincide with those of most of the world's population, present or as yet unborn, nor, as institutions, do many of them seem to care. For an idea of how, for example, big corporations now see reconstruction after war, look at the case of Iraq, where huge amounts of the country's infrastructure has been "privatised", from oil to seeds.

Now in the face of these overwhelming trends, the control paradigm as it has been called, may be ultimately doomed, but it will not be abandoned lightly, and it will cause much unnecessary suffering on the way. There is another way, an alternative paradigm which people are beginning to mobilise around: sustainable security is one name for it. It is based on an understanding of security as interdependence rather than domination. It is based on many if not all the values that peacebuilders hold.

But at the moment we are out of balance. The world spends some \$ 60 billion on development assistance each year and provides about \$20 billion each year for the UN and all its agencies. Sounds pretty good. But current global spending on the military forces and weaponry is \$ 1200 billion, some 20 times more than on poverty alleviation and 60 times more than on the UN, arguably the world's most important peace organization. In the UK, for every pound the UK spends on conflict prevention, my colleague Scilla Elworthy has calculated that 1885 are spent on war making³.

Making all due allowance for bias in statistics, world society, including the Asia region, I would suggest, is truly out of balance. As we go forward the predominant approach of the powerful to any threats to the current global order is coercion rather than cooperation, and it will be hard to shift, both internationally and more locally.

3. Reality and the shifting NGO peace agenda

So where does this leave us? Where is the peace agenda? How connected are we to the struggle to turn this around and build something new: to resist, to restore, to heal? Or are we just – I don't mean that lightly – fighting the fires? Are we actually negative peace, politicians' peacebuilders? If we look at our work in the cold light of day (as they say back home), the context it is being fitted into, the big picture effects it has, we have to question whether what we do is helping to redress the balance, is relevant to the struggle to resist and reverse these trends. I

³ Smart Power: Saving Money, Saving Lives. Available from The International Task Force on Preventive Diplomacy Secretariat at the East-West Institute's Brussels Centre., EWI Brussels Centre, Rue de la Loi, 83-85 Brussels, 1040

want to look at this question briefly before making some suggestions as to how can we become more effective in building the “people’s peace”, a sustainable and peaceful world?

Looking at how we are now, my concern is that, in developing our technical expertise, essential as it has been, and in receiving the funding to do it, many of us, certainly not all, may have suppressed or lost sight of the transformative dimension of our field. We have become more often patchers of the status quo (unsustainable as it is) than builders of the new. Many of us, with our eyes fixed on our own situations and the need to address the suffering, have allowed ourselves to be co-opted unknowingly as pacifiers, reinforcers for the old order, if you like. “Who pays the piper calls the tune” is an English proverb which may be relevant here.

I have been looking recently at the case of Saferworld. Here is a highly respected NGO in our field, based in the UK. They are doing a very good job by all accounts. But the job they are doing is interesting, especially in relation to how it has changed. SW actually began life as the UK Nuclear Freeze Movement back in the early 1980s. This was part of a global movement campaigning for an end to the nuclear arms race. It called on the U.S. and Soviet Union to “adopt a mutual freeze on the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons and of missiles” and on Britain France and China to make bilateral cuts in line with this.

In the words of a key account: “The Freeze struck right to the heart of the military build-up ordered by President Carter and later continued by Reagan.”⁴ It was therefore highly political and ambitious.

For a time the Freeze was a major international coalition or movement, especially in the US. It lost influence and fell apart during the 1980s without achieving its specific goals, though it achieved much else, which one could go into... Freeze in the UK inevitably lost momentum also, but it had a substantial amount of continuing support from those who wanted multilateral nuclear disarmament.

Saferworld was born out of these ashes in the late 1980s, and with some of this fuel, though it does not say so now on its website. It now is a major international NGO, funded mostly by the EU and various Western governments. Its goals are now rather different – as its website describes: “We work to create safer communities in places affected by violent crime, conflict and the impact of small arms and light weapons. We do this by policy research, technical support to governments and civil society, and advocacy. Working with our partners in governments and in the community, we focus on: small arms and light weapons; arms transfer controls; conflict-sensitive development; security and justice; sector development international advocacy; and training.”⁵

See how the mission has evolved as the organisation has changed and grown over a couple of decades or so. It began life committed to addressing one of our global trends: militarism by demanding policy change of its own government. It ran into difficulties and changed tack. It decided to refocus on smaller weapons rather than the largest, and those of other people

⁴ Adams, David. *The American Peace Movements*. Advocate Press, 1985, 2002

⁵ http://www.saferworld.org.uk/pages/what_we_do.html

(smaller, poorer nations largely) rather than those of its own government and others in the North.

As a result it is now highly respected and competent in what it does. But does it, I wonder, still have the wider picture in its sights? It may well do, but it says nothing on its website, for example, about the urgency of a new global agreement on nuclear weapons amid their continuing spread to new countries, nor about the recent decision by the UK to renew its own nuclear weapons.

It is shortly to be evaluated by the UK government after a grant of several million pounds, mainly for small arms reduction. And in the Terms of Reference there is a phrase: “We will soon decide what role we require Saferworld to play under these new arrangements”. Clearly there is lots more government money coming for good honest work.

It is no criticism of Saferworld, to question this transition and to wonder how far others have followed this kind of logic in search of a viable future. International NGOs are especially in the frame here I think. No wonder our transformative role is harder to find than it used to be.

There are many more examples of course. See how for instance Search for Common Ground, perhaps the largest conflict transformation NGO in the world, is reputedly unable to work with Islamist groups in the Middle East, including Hamas, despite its impeccable mission statement and values. Why? Because the US government is a major funder. How can significant work for peace happen in that region without including Islamist groups? You don’t need to tell me, or I suspect SCG staff, about the dangers of excluding key players from programmes.

All of us, of course, make compromises to do the work we do. At what stage, I am asking, does this go so far as to negate the wider aims we are working for?

The pendulum which necessarily had in the past to swing towards developing our technical expertise – how else could we have any credibility to back our vision? – needs now to swing back towards our values, towards transformation. I believe that this will open up new avenues and give us much more influence on the way the world is going. I may be wrong, of course. If so I am sure you will tell me.

4. Rediscovering transformation

So far, we have looked at some of the, very significant, achievements of the peace building/conflict transformation field, and set these against a backcloth of the major trends which will shape our world for the coming decades. I have suggested that there may be a mismatch between the two, and that the sustainable security paradigm, the deep, warm, vigorous peace we talk about, the good society, which we analyse with our tools, which is free of structural and cultural violence, and full of peacefully resolving conflicts, may not be seriously advanced by much of our work. It may even be slowed down. Many of us, I have suggested, are putting out brush fires, with funds from institutions who are not too keen to look at why the fires keep breaking out. Financial and other logic may be deterring some of us from looking at that issue too.

So what, then? What can we realistically do?

In the spirit of starting a conversation, I want to make put three questions to you, in the hope that this will throw up some new ideas and enable each of us to see where the openings and the needs are. And the focus of my thoughts is on power and politics: making more of our own individual and collective power, finding new and better ways to influence the power structures which underlie all the situations we are working in and on.

I should add straightaway that I am not talking about doing big things, necessarily, though it certainly does not exclude that. Small is beautiful, remember. And small things can achieve big things. The mosquito knows that and so do we when we find ourselves in bed with one.

And so to my first question: ***If we agree that our peace work is being undermined by global economic and ecological trends – how can we collaborate more whole heartedly with those working directly on these problems?***

Our colleagues in civil society who work on poverty alleviation and development, rights, environmental issues, inclusion and participation and much more are all honing and putting their specific pieces into the jigsaw puzzle of what we understand as positive peace, peace writ large. Each piece is crucial – without it the picture is damaged and incomplete, but each also needs the whole to have its full meaning. Currently in many places there is little or no contact between us as yet. We are often rivals for the same resources. And yet if we continue to act as if our issue was the most important, or at least, quite distinct from the others, we have little chance of building the peace we all want to see. What use is development if it takes place while destroying the environment? What use is a peace agreement if it paves the way for an incursion of international firms with little respect for the rights of local people?

I think this offers a major opportunity for us. But I think the all embracing nature of peace (compare rights or development or environment) does give us the option of a potentially transformative role of tracing out the bigger picture with them, of consciously seeing and articulating others' and our work as intrinsically related to the wider vision of wellbeing we all want to see.

Now this does not mean that we somehow try to subsume or claim their activities within ours. Far from it. The image I have in mind is of weaving threads through a large tapestry full of different pictures, so that they are seen to connect with and enhance each other in a bigger picture. For many of us it may mean little more than developing and reinforcing relationships, initiating discussions about the wider vision beyond our different projects. For others it may mean developing joint pieces of work, or building wider coalitions.

For others it might be possible to go further, to the stage of developing integrated policy platforms together at local, regional or national level. This would aim to articulate policies

founded on cooperation, not domination. It could be politically transformative. There is more about this in the Open Letter to Peacebuilders⁶ by the way.

If this sounds too abstract, a vital opportunity already exists in the forthcoming global conference on climate change in Copenhagen in 2009. This will be an absolutely crucial event in the follow-up process to the Kyoto agreement. If nothing significant comes out of this many observers think it is most unlikely that runaway climate change can be avoided – with all the inevitable impact on human society as a whole, and on our own aspirations for peace.

Environmental groups are working hard to develop strong policy platforms and already lobbying governments on the positions they will take. Many humanitarian and development organisations have joined them to make sure the links with poverty and development are fully understood and integrated, and the policies advocated are consistent with development principles. But where are we? Who is there feeding in the expertise we have gained in violence prevention, conflict transformation and peace-building as an integral part of ecological harmony? One thing is sure: the environmental crisis will give rise to intensified conflict over the coming decades, whether or not the worst effects of climate change are avoided. The changes required will be huge. We need to make sure our know-how, yes our technical competence, is better articulated and more widely known about. It is a huge opportunity, I believe, to put a different paradigm for handling conflict at the heart of any process of adjustment that is coming.

And in such a grouping it may be possible to look more deeply at how we can engage the global corporations with our vision and our concerns, without being co-opted by them. At present it seems that some of us talk with them about mitigating the worst effects of conflict (eg Shell in Nigeria) and a few are encouraging them to be conflict sensitive and socially responsible. If they are indeed the drivers of the global economy, they are the drivers of each local economy. Surely we need to find a way of connecting with them, or linking with those who are doing this. It would be good to hear from those here who are doing this.

My second question has more to do with depth than breadth, with *how* we do things rather than who we do things with. ***How can we be more robust in our methods, and engage more fully with the philosophy, methods and practitioners of active non-violence?***

Veronique Dudouet has argued eloquently in a recent article for the Berghof Handbook on Conflict Transformation that while non-violent resistance and conflict transformation strategies share a common goal, namely “social change and increased justice through peaceful means”, a sharp divorce has occurred between what she calls the “revolutionary” and “resolutionary” camps. While conflict transformation originated within the broader peace movement, each has developed its own constituency of activists, theories and scholars, techniques and so on.⁷

⁶ Fisher, Simon and Lada Zimina. Just Wasting Our Time? An Open Letter to Peacebuilders.
<http://lettertopeacebuilders.ning.com>

⁷ Dudouet, Veronique. Nonviolent Resistance and Conflict Transformation in Power Asymmetries,
http://www.berghof-handbook.net/uploads/download/dudouet_handbook.pdf

She observes that while conflict transformation, and presumably peacebuilding, includes all forms of violence in its analysis, its techniques and practice have tended to focus on the direct and attitudinal dimensions, rather than the deeper structural, latent dimensions. Its methods, she says, are more readily recognised as problem solving and dialogue. We do conflict resolution and prevention, mediation, negotiation, bridge-building, public awareness work, legal work, in both senses. We talk of quiet diplomacy and often puts impartiality at the core of our principles. Conflict transformation is in this view most suited to situations where power relations are broadly symmetrical, balanced. We talk of situations of latent conflict, and the importance of addressing them until power is more equally balanced, perhaps in a situation of open confrontation when conflict transformations methods can be applied, and we try to work creatively in them.

But arguably it is the domain of non-violent resistance which has developed the most creative ways of addressing power imbalances. It has been described as fomenting “creative disorder”: magnifying existing social and political tensions, mainly by increasing the cost to those who want to maintain their dominance. Non-violent resistance has always been focussed on resisting oppression, seeking to find ways to reverse situations where power is asymmetrically distributed between dominant power holders and relatively powerless groups. Sharp’s 1973 *Manual for a Nonviolent Revolution* listed 198 forms of non-violent action under 3 headings: protest and persuasion, non-cooperation and non-violent intervention. In this frame, most third party interveners are deliberately partial, putting themselves on the side of the victims or lower power groups – a big contrast with conflict transformation practitioners. If we say that negotiation is only possible “when the needs and interests of all those involved are legitimated and articulated”⁸, isn’t non-violent resistance its necessary companion, assisting less powerful groups to get into a position of at least relative power equality?

The benefits would go both ways. If we look at many examples of regime change achieved by non-violent campaigns, they are characterised by a tendency of the “ancien regime” to reassert itself once the dust has settled. Perhaps the understanding of post-conflict peacebuilding that exists within the conflict transformation approach might be useful here.

And are we sure we are using the most effective methods in “democratic” countries? Sometimes I think those of us living in such societies are continuing to play the gentle democratic game when the power elites have moved on: elections, petitions, letters to members of parliament, achieve little change in the UK for example because the key decisions – on nuclear issues, energy policy, the alliance with Uncle Sam - are taken behind closed doors. What would it take, I wonder, for northern-based INGOs especially to pay more critical attention to the deeds of their own governments? And to adopt more confrontational methods when they are ignored? There is no serious effort in the UK and US (as far as I know) to hold the political leaders to account for the invasion of Iraq, for example. What an opportunity to develop our agenda in public, but how risky for those doing it if they are also funded by that government?

⁸ Lederach, John Paul 1995. *Preparing For Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

How far does this sound like reality to you? Maybe, if it does, it is time to look for ways of building stronger links between the two fields, sharing methods of analysis and intervention with each other. Certainly it might offer one way in which the field of conflict transformation could adapt to challenge more readily the huge imbalances in the way the world works, which underlie many situations in which we are working. And we have some of us here who already span both fields and can help us explore more... Please note again I am not suggesting we need necessarily to do more: I am thinking especially about the quality of what we do and the nature of our wider alliances.

And, a footnote: if we do see conflict as having many essential positive characteristics, this could be a way of putting that belief into practice. (And maybe we could we start practising that in our relationships with each other and within our organisations? What does a conflict-positive organisation look like?).

So my first two questions concern strategy: who we work with and how we work. They both therefore raise the wider question of how we think change happens: often called our “theory of change”. In more straightforward terms, how do we see the links between what each of us is doing and the deeper, wider picture?⁹ My impression is that we often tend to assume this connection, and now may be an opportunity to make our theories more explicit.

Personally, on reflection, I think that I may, for some time, have understated the importance of working with people in and around government. I may have put more emphasis on working at grassroots and middle levels than was justified, in terms of big picture change. The idea was that grassroots pressure leads to political change. I still believe it does. But, I now believe, grassroots pressure cannot achieve real change without at least equivalent work taking place at higher Political level to prepare the ground for such change. Was that out of my own personal preference, or unacknowledged socialist ideology, or a really thought through position which I could defend? I fear it may not have been primarily the last of these.

Now as members of our networks are moving into political positions that is changing anyway and I am delighted. I hope we will get more guidance from them as to how to work more effectively with people at their level in political life.

Another assumption I have made is that transformation for peace and justice can happen in small groups if we have a well thought through, participative, practical process. That assumption I am glad to say has been born out hugely.

Now, I have shared some of my assumptions. What about you? How do you think your work connects with the future we want to build? Think small and here and now. Seeds and trees. It may make you think for example about the flexibility you have in you everyday work, and explore how it can extend to include more transformative as well as technical dimensions. (see Open Letter to Peacebuilders).

⁹ See CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, especially Reflecting on Peace Practice. www.cdainc.com

And now my final question, which is: *how can we generate ongoing, creative inspiration and solidarity amongst ourselves so that we can build peace more effectively?*

Close your eyes and imagine a typical peace builder. What do you see? When I do that I see someone who is passionate, hyper-busy, too short of time to do much if any reading let alone writing, near burn-out, resolutely cheerful but often secretly fighting off cynicism and despair. We cannot do this work well, we cannot respond creatively to our changing context if we don't make time to be in touch with ourselves and our sources of hope. (*Ah that sounds so good, but I remember when running a course not so long ago, the one topic we had to leave out because of time was, wait for it, "looking after ourselves". And that was not the only time it has happened.*)

Peace has always been as much about internal change as external. For us, quintessentially, the personal is political. When Gandhi said 'Be the change you want to see' he was pointing to the fact that if we do not do this inner work, much of what we are trying to do risks being negated by the way we are ourselves.

So what is this inner work? You could say it is about maximising our inner resources. In other language you can say it is about finding our own spirituality – which for me does not necessarily imply or exclude religion. I mean recognising our deep interconnectedness – with the planet and all its people, including of course those responsible for the violence and harm we are trying to address. It entails a continuing struggle to put oneself in the situation of the other, to transform ourselves as we try to help others transform themselves and their situations.

Which makes it clear that peace work is not only for "them". It is for us, for ourselves. Somehow professionalization, good in many ways, loses sight of this crucial aspect of peacebuilding. We build our own inner peace, as we build theirs. Or we are doing neither. We risk being simply a clock face, without any mechanism inside.

It helps us become more emotionally literate, as they say. We become more conscious of our own egos and the dangers the ego brings if unchecked. We are willing to ask ourselves whose needs we are meeting in this work, and tolerate the honest answer. If we remain a battle ground inside, we will not only be unable to be effective peacebuilders, we will probably carry on that fight with others in our working lives (does this ring any bells?).

Some of you will know Hizkias Assefa, a wise, highly experienced mediator. He pointed me to a story from the Sufi mystic Byazid:

From a young age I was a revolutionary and my prayer consisted of saying to God: "Lord, give me strength to change the world." When I matured into an adult and realised that I had passed through half of my life without having changed even one soul, I altered my prayer and began to say "Lord, give me grace to transform those who come into contact with me, even if this may only be my family and friends. With this I will be satisfied." Now that I am old and my days are numbered, I have started to understand how stupid I have been. My only prayer now is: Lord, give me grace to change myself." If I had prayed this way from the beginning I would not have wasted

*my life. Everyone attempts to change humanity. Almost no one thinks about changing oneself.*¹⁰

And how does this inner dimension relate to our practice? There are people here who can speak far more eloquently and knowledgeably than I can. But growing self-awareness and depth, in my experience, leads to greater curiosity, so we may notice ourselves reading more, including the literature of our field, and writing more too. We will find it irresistible to learn from what we do and to help our colleagues do so too. We will be able to enjoy our failures as well as successes. We will find more courage and more laughter too.

5. Conclusion

I have tried in this short talk (well shortish, as they say – it just kept jumping out of its little box) to open up some areas for thought.

I have set out a hypothesis for you to examine and see if you think it is relevant to you: in a nutshell: as the peacebuilding community has grown in size we have developed a high level of expertise but our radical agenda has become marginalised, if not lost altogether. This is especially true of INGOs, many of whom have become closely allied to the powers that be, in government and business. We risk becoming at best irrelevant to the major problems of this region, this world, at worst low cost facilitators of a world order which is unsustainable and unjust. If we re-envision ourselves, we can become a genuinely powerful catalyst both locally, where we are, and globally for human survival and global change. The pendulum needs to swing back.

None of what I have said, friends, implies doing more or bigger things. It is not about being even busier. I think it is about us finding creative ways in the here and now to subvert and change the underlying dynamics of the situations we are working on and in, so that they are more life enhancing. Are we provoking ourselves, and those we work with and for, to question the status quo, to be curious about why injustices and violence occur, to study, to explore how our social and political power can be used in whatever situations of injustice and violence we find ourselves. If we are, we are probably on the transformative path; but we had better check regularly, and bravely, by asking our colleagues and friends for some honest feedback – for that is part of the transformative path also.

We can be proud of our peacebuilding community's achievements. Yet, for all our successes, for all our perseverance, our impact on the big picture remains frustratingly slight, and that big picture is alarming as we look into the future.

We are faced with no less than a massive insanity. Violence is not built into our genetic make-up. We know that. We learn it and become desensitised to it. It is ultimately a sickness and should be treated and cured as such. If we learn violence we can unlearn it, in all its forms, locations and levels. Is it just a dream to imagine we could generate a world-wide campaign

¹⁰ For an article by Hizkias Assefa which elaborates on this theme, see Wajibu: Journal of Social and Ethical Concern, Vol. 22, No 1 : Peacebuilding: Gaining or Losing? Nairobi, Kenya. www.peacelink.it/afrinews.html

which would focus people's minds on the virus of violence, which destroys so much, including the sanity of many of those it infects. The world is doing it for AIDS. Many countries are now doing it for smoking. Why not for violence, which probably kills more than both of them?

We need to be thinking about major changes if we are to have the impact we and our peacebuilding task deserve. And yet grounding this response deeply and locally in ourselves and our organisations. Perhaps this credit crunch is a real opportunity to get our agenda out there into the mainstream. Can we rise to the challenge? Where better to find out than here and now?

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