



COMMUNITY ACTION AND PEACE-BUILDING: MECHANISMS FOR ADDRESSING DIFFERENCE

June 20-21, 2002
Belfast, Northern Ireland

On June 20 and 21 over 100 community leaders from Northern Ireland gathered in Belfast to discuss the challenges facing them as they try to find ways to achieve true peace. Given recent outbreaks of violence in Northern Ireland and the onset of the annual summer marching season, the timing of this session was particularly auspicious and participants came ready to confront a range of difficult issues. In particular, discussions focused on the role of community leaders and groups in peace-building and what this means in practical terms --- how community leaders define peace-building and what actions they take to advance and achieve it.

The session opened with welcomes by **Avila Kilmurray**, Director of the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, and **Sara Zucker**, Director of Harvard University's Project on Justice in Times of Transition, who represented the two co-sponsoring organizations. **Paddy Sloan**, Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, who acted as chair of the conference then introduced the first speaker. **Michael Morrissey**, a Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Ulster and Chair of the Urban Institute in Belfast, offered thoughts about the context for community action and peace-building in Northern Ireland. He put forward some challenging questions such as: How necessary is peace-building in Northern Ireland? How should community activists deal with social and economic issues? And is there or should there be a particular role for community-based organizations in Northern Ireland? Professor Morrissey noted that the peace process in Northern Ireland has been rather elitist and community groups must

determine the appropriate role for themselves with regard to peace-building. He mentioned that the Troubles had not been an equal experience across Northern Ireland society, but that some neighborhoods had been more directly affected than others, and it is critical to talk to people who have different beliefs in order to recognize other realities. (In order to further demonstrate this point, Professor Morrissey took the group through the results of a "Life and Times Survey" that charted Catholics' and Protestants' perceptions of how each group was treated five years previously and at the time of the survey, as well as ideas about relations between the two communities. Finally, Professor Morrissey talked about the mandate and challenges of the European Union Support Program for Peace and Reconciliation ("Peace II") including such ambitious agendas as economic renewal, social integration and inclusion, and local regeneration.

Youk Chhang, the Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, followed Mr. Morrissey with an outside perspective. He also stressed that conflict transformation and peace-building are dependent upon community action. He spoke movingly about his personal experiences during the reign of the Khmer Rouge and the organization he founded as a result, emphasizing that peace can not be built or sustained without justice. He began his presentation with an overview of what happened in Cambodia, citing that two million people were killed in the four year period from 1975 to 79, during which there were no functioning schools, hospitals, housing facilities or roads. The Khmer Rouge was defeated in 1979 but the new regime brought continued fighting and

peace was only sought after 20 years of violence. Despite the eventual intervention of the United Nations and the election of a new government, Cambodians found it difficult to move forward. In Mr. Chhang's view, an international tribunal to prosecute those responsible for the atrocities is the key to Cambodia's progress. He said that he found it critically important to ensure that what had happened to him and others was not forgotten, and he explained the work of the Documentation Center of Cambodia which is to help survivors reconstruct their memories. This is done by collecting materials about what happened during the Khmer Rouge regime, cataloguing and publicizing this information. Testimony of both victims and perpetrators is documented to ensure that the full story is told. As well, the Center is involved in the documentation of prisons and identification of mass graves. Interestingly, Mr. Chhang noted that in his work he had traveled to every single district in Cambodia and not a single survivor spoke about compensation for what was lost.

Through the Documentation Center of Cambodia, Mr. Chhang has been able to help provide other Cambodians with the resources, knowledge and possibilities to decide whether they want to forgive or reconcile. He stressed that forgiveness can only be granted by those who have been wronged, that God and religion can not take responsibility. Rather it is the responsibility of those involved in war to resolve their own differences so they can live together in harmony, and this will be a very lengthy process. Searching for identity is not the answer, he maintained --- in order to end conflict and reconcile, people must search for humanity and see everyone, including perpetrators, as human beings.

Billy Robinson, the Director of Counteract in Northern Ireland, spoke about community activists' fears related to peace-building. He explained that a variety of fears --- fear of change, fear of being exposed, fear of failure, fear of engaging in the process because if one fails it will let people down and maybe do more damage, fear of success because it may raise people's expectations that can not be met

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- Billy Robinson

again, fear of not making the correct decisions, fear of the unknown, fear of putting one's head above the parapet, fear of funders, and fear of no change --- are all common, genuine and legitimate fears of community activists in Northern Ireland. However, he added that fear can also be positive as it forces people to be cautious in their actions and to think carefully about the challenges they face. Mr. Robinson noted that a brave person is one who makes a judgment, and considering that judgment takes action. Fear, he commented, is an emotion and many people in Northern Ireland, especially males, have difficulty expressing and dealing with feelings. He cited four tools necessary for making change in Northern Ireland: relevance, credibility, active listening and challenge, all of which have a component of fear. He stated that the main question is: if you do not feel fear, are you being challenged?" Accordingly, he exhorted participants to welcome fear and to constructively incorporate it into their work.

Snjezana Kovacevic, Program Director of the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights in Croatia, echoed some of the themes that had been raised earlier in the day. Her comments focused on work with religious communities and its relation to peace-building at the community level in Croatia. She explained that the first step was creating an atmosphere to open dialogue by beginning with members of one religious group and encouraging them to express ideas about how they might live together with members of the other group. Once this had been done with members of the two religious groups separately, they were brought together to discuss common interests and topics of mutual concern. Ms. Kovacevic described the strength of religious identity in Croatia and how it had increased during the war when the Catholic Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church equated personal faith or religious identity with national identity. Members of other religious groups were made to feel excluded from the

Croatian national identity which was also damaging. Even after a group of high-level representatives of both churches came together to endorse non-violence and organize seminars and discussions on the subject, they never mentioned the concepts of forgiveness or victims, both of which were critical in the post-war context. The Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights tried to fill this gap by organizing panel discussions about such topics as coexistence and basic non-violence including how to address domestic violence. One concrete result of this work was the emergence of a program called “A Touch of Hope” which uses priests to work with war veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome. The program has helped many war veterans in their healing process and the fact that members of the churches are involved has been particularly significant.

The second day of the conference was opened by **James Cooney**, Executive Director of Harvard University’s Weatherhead Center for International Affairs and Steering Committee member of the Project on Justice in Times of Transition. After some reflections by Mr. Cooney and conference chair Paddy Sloan on the discussions during the first day of the session, **Branka Kaselj**, Director of the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights, spoke about her organization in Croatia and how she and her colleagues had to confront many fears when organizing at the community level, due to a tense political climate in a divided society. She said that for these community leaders who wanted to entrench peace in Croatia, the first step had been the statement “I choose life” which then led to learning, gaining skills, and living their values in their communities. Essentially, this first step was to open dialogue despite mistrust. Ms. Kaselj then took the group through the relevant details of the conflict in Croatia, emphasizing statistics about the high rates of unemployment and the ethnic break-down of the country in order to illustrate some of the social problems that exist. She explained that the Center focused its strategy on recovery and development of a multi-ethnic community, healing the traumatized population and stopping continued violence and violations

of human rights. This is done through work with particular groups of women, ethnicities, schools and churches, war veterans, youth and elderly people. Specific mechanisms include a listening program that helps people to better understand each other’s needs, informal education with the goal of increasing participative methods of community development, and support programs for community-based organizations. As well, the Center provides volunteers with basic training on such topics as non-violence as an opportunity to improve quality of life, dealing with combatants, cooperation with local authorities, team building, training for presentations and public activities, and development of joint projects.

Ms. Kaselj was quite candid about the obstacles faced by community activists and peace workers in Croatia, and from the expressions of the conference participants it seemed that her experiences were analogous to those of people in Northern Ireland. In particular, the ideas of overcoming one’s own fears and prejudices toward the other side, toward the local authorities, and toward governmental institutions were consistent with ideas that were expressed during the small group discussions throughout the conference. Ms. Kaselj also noted that in Croatia it is very difficult to maintain motivation for community action, particularly among unemployed individuals who feel that all of their efforts should go toward seeking jobs. This is just one facet of the problem of achieving long-term engagement at the community level but she urged community leaders to be open to learning despite their own vulnerabilities.

Mary Lynch, Regional Manager of the PRONI Institute of Social Education in the Balkans, was able to share her perspective as a community activist from Northern Ireland who was working in Bosnia, another society grappling with the legacy of conflict. In a humorous and insightful comment she began by saying that as the youngest of six children she had been told to shut up and listen, a practice that had served her well as a community worker because it enabled her to learn the context of a

problem before proposing a solution. Ms. Lynch then gave a brief overview of the conflict in Bosnia and noted some of the ways in which it had been different than the situation in Northern Ireland. She mentioned that the stipulations of the Dayton Accord which split Bosnia into the Federation and the Republika Srpska mean that it is very hard to build peace in an area where people are not challenged to do so because they all come from the same community. Also, she noted that in addition to being a post-conflict society, Bosnia is a post-Communist society that has no history of community activism, so peace-building through organized community groups is particularly challenging. Nor is there the luxury of political correctness or “safe space” in Bosnia and “people just have to say what they think and move on.” This moving on requires strategies, though, and Ms. Lynch stated that education is the basis for doing so. If people know what they are talking about they can have the courage to have a discussion and that is how progress begins. Therefore, she emphasized that the strategy for peace-building should be to gain information and knowledge and communication will follow.

Over the two days of the conference several small group discussions were interspersed with presentations, coffee breaks and meals. These working group sessions were divided by topics and conference participants chose the ones they considered most relevant to their own interests. The subjects included peace-building through a range of aspects: single identity work, community arts and culture, working with victims of the Troubles, community action, and conflict resolution and transformation, as well as peace-building in areas of tension, with young people, and in rural and cross-border areas. Each group was facilitated by two or three community activists who began the discussion by sharing their own thoughts and strategies about the topic at hand. The small group discussions were lively and thought-provoking, in large part because the range of conference participants was extensive, including long-time community activists and those who were new to the field, and individuals from both sides of the sectarian divide.

The program participants agreed with the individuals from Cambodia and Croatia, as well as the speakers from Northern Ireland, who stated that the challenges of grassroots peace-building are daunting when one is working in a political or social climate that may not be conducive to effecting change. However, despite being realistic about obstacles, community leaders from Northern Ireland were able to identify areas in which they might advance peace. Given the number of groups and the richness of the presentations, it was difficult to summarize all of the ideas explored, but Avila Kilmurray listed a few important points about next steps, based on what had been stated throughout the conference. She noted that despite various problems, the European Union “Peace II” program offers substantial resources for dealing with the legacy of the past and taking advantage of the opportunities for peace. Clearly there are many interpretations and definitions of peace-building, yet there are also a number of common elements, including:

- making a choice to take part;
- learning from one’s own experience and the experience of others;
- developing skills for facilitating dialogue and considering approaches for remembering the past; and
- dealing with conflict and difference, and developing strategies for participation.

Furthermore, the importance of relevant knowledge and the ability to communicate are critical. The other element of peace-building is that of values and the “Peace II” document itself contains both explicit and implicit values such as a commitment to the principles of equality and equity, inclusiveness and social inclusion, peace and reconciliation. All of these require community activists to challenge themselves, their organizations and their communities, and to work between communities. This requires mechanisms and strategies for community activists to examine their own perceptions not only by looking in the mirror but by speaking with those who will not automatically agree with these perceptions. Finally, Ms. Kilmurray

encouraged conference attendees to offer their ideas and recommendations in order to enable the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust and others to help them move forward with peace-building.

The June 2002 conference, which was the Project's 13th programmatic initiative focused on Northern Ireland, was part of a multi-faceted three-year plan launched in February 2001. Four parts of the program take the form of conferences or workshops for political and community leaders in Northern Ireland, and the fifth element involves the development and use of materials documenting the experience of Northern Ireland. The overarching goals of the

Project's programming in Northern Ireland are to:

- afford an opportunity for a broad representation of leaders in Northern Ireland to spend a concentrated amount of time together focused on issues of relevance to the consolidation of peace and democracy
- encourage the development of connections among the participants in order to increase trust and facilitate collaborative and complementary work on a range of subjects of concern at both the political and community levels
- provide political and community leaders in Northern Ireland with an impetus to develop solutions to some of the challenges facing their society by exposing them to examples from other societies in the world

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This summary report was written by Sara Zucker.

The Project on Justice in Times of Transition

The Project on Justice in Times of Transition is an inter-faculty initiative of Harvard University under the auspices of the Kennedy School of Government, the Harvard Law School, and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Originally founded in 1992 as part of the New York-based Foundation for a Civil Society, the Project assists states emerging from repression or conflict to engage in dialogue across national, ethnic, religious and ideological boundaries with the intention of preventing legacies of the past from jeopardizing their progress toward democracy and peace. The June 2002 program for community leaders in Northern Ireland was the 32nd of the Project's distinct initiatives which have provided an extraordinary stimulus to pragmatic problem-solving by offering a broad spectrum of individuals exposure to international experiences in ending conflict, establishing peace, and building civil society. Among the countries and regions in which the Project has worked are South Africa, Northern Ireland, Central and Eastern Europe, and Central America.

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