

SEMINARS ON SOCIAL ACTION AND PEACE-BUILDING

June 17-20, 2003
Northern Ireland

In June 2003 the Project on Justice in Times of Transition and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland organized a series of seminars for a diverse group of Northern Ireland community leaders. The **Social Action and Peace-building Seminars** afforded community leaders an opportunity to discuss the challenges facing Northern Ireland as they tried to find ways to achieve true peace, and to consider practical approaches and strategies for addressing these challenges.

Based on feedback from participants in past conferences, the Project and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland decided to hold a series of workshops rather than one session, in order to make the program accessible to a greater number of people and to enable discussion about issues of particular concern on a local level. Accordingly, seminars were held in Belfast, Killesher (in County Fermanagh), Ballyronan and Claudy (both in County Derry). Each seminar lasted three hours and was followed by lunch. The session in Belfast had the greatest number of participants (60 people) and the session in Killesher the fewest (8 people) so the dynamic of each seminar was unique. However, even the sessions that were attended by relatively small numbers of people drew participants from a range of community groups and backgrounds so the debates were lively and engaging.

Each seminar began with presentations by practitioners from other countries who have first-hand experience with issues of peace-building and reconciliation. Following the presentations, seminar participants broke into small groups in order to discuss strategies and techniques they have used successfully in Northern Ireland. The

emphasis of the sessions was on sharing ideas about effective community action, including those that were considered “best practices”.

The seminars opened with a presentation by **Brandon Hamber**, a South African who has worked and lived in Belfast, Northern Ireland since early 2001. Trained as a clinical psychologist, Brandon has worked for the Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in Johannesburg, South Africa and the Belfast-based think-tank, Democratic Dialogue. He is the editor of *Past Imperfect: Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland and Societies in Transition*. At the outset of each of the four seminars, Brandon offered his analysis of the process of peace-building. He spoke about the distinction between peace-making and peace-building and how the latter might differ from reconciliation or community relations, insofar as peace-building is a long-term process that seeks to address the root causes and effects of violence. Brandon also detailed 15 principles of peace-building which included: addressing the causes of conflict; aiming to develop a just and equitable society; utilizing local skills and resources; and developing common values and vision, among others.

Kalpana Sharma then spoke about her experience with peace-building in India. She is Deputy Editor of *The Hindu*, a national English language daily. She has been a journalist and author for over 30 years and has focused her writing on environmental and developmental issues, the concerns of women, poverty, and communal conflict in different parts of India. Kalpana described the city of Bombay as a microcosm of conflict due to the absence of planning regarding housing for a large population or appropriate long-

term employment for people from different economic classes. Following a series of riots in 1992-1993, people came together in neighborhood committees that identified issues of common concern and, through collaborative efforts, built trust. She cited examples related to a festival procession that had been contentious, cricket teams, and communication between citizens and the police.

The third speaker, **Rafael Marques**, is currently a representative of the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa in Angola. He has had an extensive career in journalism but is also noted for coordinating the first-ever evaluation by Angolan civil society organizations of the state of democratization in Angola, and editing the first human rights report on Angola by Angolans. Rafael spoke about the history of Angola and how no living generation in the country has an idea of what it means to be a part of a peaceful society. In 2002 a peace agreement was signed but people were skeptical that conditions would change, and no formal mechanisms were put in place to help overcome hatred. Accordingly, the emerging Angolan civil society has tried to address the issues that are bypassed by politicians, a process Rafael described in a fascinating way.

For two of the sessions, the groups were joined by **Vesna Nikolic-Ristanovic** who is a Senior Researcher at the Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research in Serbia. Vesna offered her thoughts about conflict and peace-building in the Balkans, emphasizing that a consultative process is critical before the establishment of any formal truth and reconciliation mechanism. She also noted that lack of trust and a low level of self-esteem are common among people who have been traumatized.

Following the presentations, participants were given time to discuss their reactions and ideas. While the subjects of conversations were wide-ranging, and attendees at each seminar had particular views and concerns, there were a number of topics that came up repeatedly. A common concern was how to define and measure the impact of peace-building, in particular how to recognize and acknowledge small steps in a gradual process, and what might be indicators of success. Several people mentioned that the “language of peace-

building” can be inaccessible and that perhaps it would be more constructive to think in terms of social inclusion or community development. Another recurring theme throughout the sessions was the importance of support and training for people involved in peace-building in order to ensure that they do not become overwhelmed.

There was also a good deal of discussion about Northern Ireland’s culture of silence and denial which was humorously characterized by the common strategy of “whatever you say, say nothing”. Seminar participants seemed to agree that it is the norm for most people in Northern Ireland to go out of their way to avoid speaking candidly about the existing sectarianism and the causes of it. Group members suggested a number of possible reasons for this reality including fear, shame, reluctance to deal with emotions, and disbelief that the situation can improve. It was noted, though, that discourse in Northern Ireland has gotten more open in recent years and people are becoming more comfortable about sharing their personal stories, which leads to increased trust. However, a common refrain among the community leaders who attended the June sessions was criticism of politicians. Many participants felt that politicians seek to exacerbate divisions and undermine the efforts of community activists. Participants were also critical of the media in Northern Ireland, commenting that they only report bad news and perpetuate sectarianism with their reporting.

Another topic of extensive discussion was “single-identity work” and the need for members of communities to become comfortable with their own history and culture before engaging with members of other communities. The question was raised whether single-identity work should be viewed as a prelude to cross-community engagement or if it had value in and of itself. Interestingly, there did not seem to be a consensus among seminar participants as to what actually constitutes single-identity work, and definitions ranged from an individual being comfortable with him/herself to members of a particular community learning about their common past and gaining confidence.

It was also suggested that too often organizers and funders of activities designed for peace-building do not properly take into

consideration the needs of those they seek to engage. Rather, there is a regrettable tendency to design “one-size-fits-all” programs instead of listening and responding to people’s specific needs.

The seminars were relatively short and did not allow for extensive discussion of agreed-upon strategy and next steps. However, the discussions did generate a number of suggestions of strategies for peace-building. These included: increased use of communal and/or safe spaces; use of storytelling to break down barriers; exposure to experiences of people from other countries; broadcasting of debates on issues related to peace-building; and training on restorative justice and conflict resolution. It was also mentioned that peace-building should take place across all communities in Northern Ireland, not just the two dominant traditions. Some suggested that additional cross-border work between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland could be beneficial and help to demonstrate that the conflict has had an effect beyond just Northern Ireland. Finally, the roles of ex-prisoners, victims and police in Northern Ireland should be explored, and space should be created to enable these groups to work together.

Participant feedback indicated that the series of **Seminars on Social Action and Peace-building** had raised some important issues. The involvement of practitioners from Angola, India and South Africa was deemed very useful in enabling individuals from Northern Ireland to assess their own situation more objectively. As well, the small group discussions --- in which the international speakers also took part --- allowed community leaders to examine what is meant by the term peace-building and how it can be achieved. Some of the conversations were difficult, both because they touched upon painful issues and

because they raised complex questions that could not be easily resolved in the time span of the seminars. Nevertheless, the sessions were quite valuable for all involved; speakers and participants were able to reflect on new ideas and perspectives, and organizers gained understanding of the needs and concerns of community leaders throughout Northern Ireland.

The June 2003 seminars, which were the Project’s 15th programmatic initiative focused on Northern Ireland, were 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.

Acknowledgements

The Project on Justice in Times of Transition would like to thank Nikki Bradford and Srilatha Batliwala for their assistance with this initiative. Funding for the seminar was provided by the Atlantic Philanthropies.

This 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 set of Seminars on Social Action and Peace-Building was the 36th 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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