

JUST WASTING OUR TIME?

ARTICLE FROM LECTURE BY SIMON FISHER, PhD, JULY 2011

The original title of our article, published on the web, was: *Are we just nice people wasting our time?* The revised title in the Berghof Handbook was at their suggestion: *Just Wasting our time? Provocative thoughts for peacebuilders.* The nice people was left out. Why? I think this apparent niceness is in fact an element in our current predicament, and in what I see as our ineffectiveness and tendency to collusion with forces antithetical to our values. Can we remain nice and get tougher? That is my hope, and that is what this article is aiming to promote.

In the article we took the position that, while collectively a great deal had been achieved in our field more broadly and better conceived as a movement, perhaps - there are critical factors holding us back from having the global impact our ideas, skills and values merit.

Affirming achievements

Amongst the achievements of our movement we listed distinctive methodologies for training and learning, extensive opportunities for capacity building and education, a fast developing research-based theoretical core, many grassroots pb initiatives, many centres of excellence for research and lobbying, civil society as a source of peace innovation, mass nonviolent movements for regime change, effective global networking, and the way some of this thinking has percolated upwards to governmental and inter-governmental institutions and the UN. We have come a long way.

But much of this has come at a cost, especially I think for INGOs. One of the last paragraphs of our article reads as follows:

The peacebuilding community, and those who see themselves as part of it, cannot shirk the challenge. In turning away from its core transformative values and rejecting a wholehearted engagement with power and politics, it has found the

resources necessary to develop institutionally, and gained a measure of official acceptance, but insodoing , perhaps, it has lost much of the *raison d'être* which brought it into existence. If the future of peacebuilding is to provide technical expertise to help powerful states and corporations assert their dominance over the global system more amicably and cheaply, in the short term this is an easier choice to make. But in the long run it will not stand up to scrutiny, as the resources of the world become ever more contested, and rapid deterioration of the environment alters hopes and assumptions about a sustainable future for all.

So the question we raised was: Whose agenda are we working to? Whose peace are we striving for?

After the article was written I went to work in Zimbabwe. Amongst the reasons for going was to test the validity of the views expressed in the article. Why Zimbabwe? Because I have lived and visited there on and off and for some 40 years and a good number of Zimbabweans came to RTC for the WWC course and remained in touch. So it was not alien territory. More like a second home.

My stay there gave rise to much learning, a large proportion of which is not relevant to this article. But one of the issues which constantly arises there is, whose agenda is behind the obviously well-funded NGO activity in many fields, from humanitarian to human rights, environment, democracy and peace. The regime likes to claim that civil society generally is subversive, and aiming for “regime change” – which is code for overthrowing the ZANU PF dominated government, in power effectively for over 30 years.

Now, in one sense the propaganda is clearly wrong. Most CSOs are not politically engaged in trying to change the regime. But maybe, I have begun to think, there may be more than a grain of truth in what elements in the regime are saying. After all it is the USA and its allies who are the major funders of civil society, and their views on the future of Zimbabwe are well known.

This much I think most of us in this field of work are familiar with. We live with it somehow, if uneasily, wherever we are. Our funders are not spending this money out of altruism, surely especially in these straightened times. We like to think,

many of us, that we can preserve our own specific agendas within this bigger picture, which is shaped for us. Or we prefer not to think about this issue much at all.

But the question becomes more pressing for peacebuilding NGOs, when we look at the factors which go to make up the policies of our governmental funders. Do we ever ask ourselves why the USA and its allies who fund peacebuilding still keep going to war?

Jake Lynch, Associate Professor at the University of Sydney and Director of the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies there, has calculated that, in the period between the attack on Pearl Harbour (1941) up to now the US has spent more time at war than at peace (37 out of a total of 70 years). Lynch argues that the US has therefore now switched to a country whose *normal* state is to be at war. He suggests that this is not accidental, but “the product of a system...there are indications of an in-built systemic momentum towards war.” Jake Lynch “*Coalition of the unwilling: The phenomenology and political economy of US militarism*” in *Ending War, Building Peace*, edited by Lynda-ann Blanchard and Leah Chan, Sydney University Press, 2009.)

A recent report from Brown University estimates that the U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq--together with the counterinsurgency efforts in Pakistan--will, all told, cost \$4 trillion and leave 225,000 dead, both civilians and soldiers. 550,000 disability claims have already been filed in the US as of 2010. An estimated 8 million people have been displaced as a result of this warfighting. **(How much will our wars cost? Report says \$4 trillion June 29 2011**
[Liz Goodwin | The Lookout – 4 hrs ago](http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/lookout/much-wars-cost-report-says-4-trillion-130934180.html)<http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/lookout/much-wars-cost-report-says-4-trillion-130934180.html>)

Why is this happening when many would say that western nations face less of a threat to their integrity and security than ever in history ?

It is surely not democracy which is driving this war fighting. It is perhaps not too much to suggest then these wars are being driven, or at least encouraged, by armies and the interests that are massed behind them, in the form of global corporations hungry for business selling equipment, fighting wars and then

reconstructing afterwards. Eisenhower warned the world us about this as far back as 1961 when he talked of the military industrial complex having the potential to exercise “unwarranted influence on government” and “endanger our liberties and democratic processes.” (Eisenhower speech 1961).

However, it is not all one way. There is opposition. There is resistance being offered by publics all over the world, as the Iraq, Afghan and Libyan wars have shown.

But my question is: where are we, peacebuilders, INGOs especially, in relation to this war system: are we opposing, colluding, or pretending to be outside altogether?

Are we looking upstream to see where the water that nourishes us with money and opportunity is flowing from, and how polluted it is? I believe this matters hugely, to our credibility, our integrity and our impact. Is our de facto peace writ large indistinguishable from that of Washington, London and NATO?

I am reminded of the Sufi story of a man who is walking in the street on a very dark night and drops the keys to his house. He goes over to the other side of the street where there is a street-lamp and searches under it for the keys. A passerby who has been watching says to him: why are you looking under the light? The keys must be somewhere over there in the dark. The man says, I know, but its dark over there, I can't see.

Have we as a community, a movement, lost sight of a key strand in the original vision for peace studies and peace work dating back at least to the end of the 2nd World War: that of a world free of war, violence and exploitation? Instead of going back on our tracks to try to rediscover the relevance of that vision for today, and evaluate our progress in that context, do we prefer to take the easier course, assessing our work in the light of the clear and well-funded roles we have carved

out for ourselves, with a lot of help from nice people on the other side of the street?

My second main issue looks downstream, rather than up. It concerns our approach to political repression and what I see as our weakness in addressing situations where there is an acute imbalance of power.

Systematic repression

There are obvious potential connections between the upstream context I have painted just now and the downstream, more local, situation. For example the stringent anti-terrorist conditions which many US and UK funders impose now, so that implementing partners operate effectively as information gatherers on the people they work with. I am sure there are more implications. But I don't think it explains everything by any means.

In my current work in Zimbabwe, I have struggled to find within our field as customarily defined much that is of value in addressing the grinding multiple oppressions (political, economic, psychological, gender-based) faced by people in such situations.

In the past year I received several requests for cooperation from international organizations working in peacebuilding. The example below exemplifies what I think may be a fairly typical position amongst this constituency.

With very little knowledge of the country, they already knew what they were going to do, who with, and how. In early discussions with them I pointed out the prevailing levels of repression and corruption. However they were coming with their own approach. "Our job is to encourage moderation, to defuse extremism, and to find agreement between and among the parties, even if one party or another acts in a despicable way. "

“The bottom line is: Can you work to transform the conflict in Zimbabwe, without insisting as a precondition that the playing field be leveled or that certain policies be changed?

“We are not a human rights group. Fighting for justice for one side in a conflict is not what we do. Our work is to try to find agreements between parties and, in the process, to shift the environment in which the conflict is taking place. This may seem hopeless in a place like Zimbabwe, but this is our mission. Our commitment is to the process of finding common ground, not to advancing the position of one of the parties – no matter how *right* that party might happen to be. “

The dogmatism, as it seemed to me, was striking. Nowhere in this analysis, was there room for acknowledging the danger, in the ongoing violence of a police state, of increasing the vulnerability of the weaker side through such a process. The possibility of bad faith is seemingly discounted. The existence of locally, more adapted methods, were the situation conducive, is not even entertained. The issue of power was simply ignored.

This is perhaps where we come to the difference between conflict management and resolution on the one hand and conflict transformation on the other. If we are primarily conflict management or resolution practitioners and theorists then we can reasonably say that our approach only works under certain, clearly defined and limited conditions. If however we aim to transform deeply entrenched conflicts, the full blown transformation position, then we are committed to working in situations which are characterized by asymmetric power relationships and need to go into deeper, more complex and risky terrain in order to help bring about the conditions where resolution may ultimately be possible..

I want to suggest three areas where conflict transformation can usefully focus if it is to become more relevant and effective:

First: How to resist and subvert/transform the ruthless use of power?

I have been working recently with communities facing well organized political groups, often high on drugs, intent on compelling them by all violent means to sign up, vote for them, and turn out for endless political rallies. Last week I was working with women who are sexually harassed or raped each time they go to collect water or firewood. I have had some of my most enjoyable sessions with such people, but I am “flying by the seat of my pants ” in terms of input. I have been disappointed in how little information is accessible and relevant to these situations, even from the field of nonviolent action.

There are of course many examples of resistance to draw on in Zimbabwe, as in other countries. For example there are communities which have bought whistles for every inhabitant. When political thugs come they blow the whistles. Everyone runs to drive off the thugs. In a recent case this worked well, until the villagers arrested the thugs and took them to the police. They had somehow not reckoned with the fact that the police take their orders from the regime. Outcome: villagers arrested and charged, the thugs are freed.

If we did take power issues in such situations seriously what would we be doing differently? I think we would be researching the multifarious effects of long term repression (social, psychological, cultural for example) and developing our knowledge of ways to resist and undermine/transform these. We would be looking at how groups resist under such conditions, and the very specific challenges faced by these groups. What organisational models do they have and what psychological and physical space is there to create different models?

We would surely be developing closer links with nonviolence activists, and human rights activists. We would be studying how to weaken the power of the power holders as well as how to strengthen the grassroots.

Second: Psycho-social factors

Secondly we need to take psycho-social factors very seriously. How to help people deal with (justified) fear and a sense of powerlessness? How do you work with them to help dissolve the layers of internalised oppression which bind people's hands and feet as strongly as iron fetters. These factors result in a culture of silence: no one speaks publicly about the rapes, murders and theft being committed.

This affects everyone. In much of my work in Zimbabwe I can't say the following words: democracy, rights, change, security sector reform for fear of being dubbed opposition and treated as such by the regime. How many of these compromises do I make before I lose my own agenda completely? Where is the literature about building allies in the system yet keeping one's own agenda?

This culture of silence I have referred to is bound up with the widespread but still unmet need for psycho-social healing. People are too affected by what has happened to them to be free to move on. And they cannot easily talk about what has happened. Especially in a situation where impunity prevails, and the perpetrators are still around.

Third: Civil society dynamics

The dynamics within civil society are critical. Civil society, a crucial resource for conflict transformation, has in Zimbabwe and I suspect in many other countries become in large part a mirror and an unwitting ally of the regime and the system it heads. Many of the largest and most relevant NGOs to peacebuilding strategies and ideals are led by autocratic, often corrupt leadership, both white and black. They are traumatised in their own way, both orgs and individuals, but cannot possibly admit it, even to themselves.

As for the small number of organizations that specifically describe themselves as engaging in peacebuilding or conflict transformation, with a very few notable exceptions these have tended to settle for working with easy to reach communities, where there has been no serious political violence. They are doing the work but in a manner which has no discernable link to the conflict systems

bedeviling the country. This is totally understandable, given the level of intimidation and political violence, but still not helpful in system change.

This dysfunctionality is not helped by the fact that most international peacebuilding and conflict transformation organizations appear willing to work only in a country where the government is supportive. Peace-related work in countries where the government is victimising its own people necessarily needs to happen under the radar of the government in questions. How willing are we to take the risks necessary to support local groups and organisations brave enough to do this work?

So what am I saying here?

We certainly need comprehensive transformation processes to address the many intractable situations where power is used ruthlessly to maintain the power of an elite. How else can we address the situation comprehensively? However to do so is a highly complex, strategic exercise. It requires a much broader bundle of skills and aptitudes than needed for conflict management or resolution. Being a transformation practitioner is rather different to being primarily a management and resolution practitioner. The latter is hands on and involves such work as mediation, negotiation, ceasefires, violence monitoring and prevention, early warning, conflict sensitive approaches... collectively we know how to do these things. And we know when we have done them. And how to work out if we have succeeded or not.

But in many situations of ongoing repression more is needed. We need the more far reaching analysis that transformation can offer: this may include psychological, social psychological, historical, economic, political, environmental, cultural factors...and an appropriate strategy which may include a wide range of expertise, in for example, education, human rights, law, transitional justice, environmental protection, trauma healing, development, income generation, politics, economics, active nonviolence - all of which may be constituents of the collectivity needed to

build the good society..The strategy must address the issue of the ruthless use of power and explore multiple strategies to help resist and redress the consequences.

In practice therefore, to transform any entrenched conflict requires the ability to mobilize a range of forces: perhaps Lederach's concept of social yeast is useful here: Our question should be, he says: "who, though not like-minded or like-situated in this conflict, would have a capacity, if mixed and held together, to make things grow exponentially, beyond their numbers?" We need he says "an imaginative meditative capacity". (The Moral Imagination OUP 2005, pp.91-95)

Because of all these factors, we are talking here, I believe, of a team or even network activity rather than an individual one. Conflict transformation is in many ways a very neat, attractive, "feel good" concept. But I have belatedly begun to wonder if it is too broad and vague to be practically useful to us? Have we too easily transferred it from an academic theory to a practical, strategic framework? I believe we need to give more time and energy to thinking about the scope of conflict transformation in practice, the nature of the task and how such processes can be led and sustained. In doing so we will need to revisit our values and see them in an upstream as well as downstream context, as I have described them here. If we do not do this how can we really claim to implement or evaluate CT at all?

Conclusions

In conclusion then, I see the global non-governmental peacebuilding community as doing excellent work in many ways in helping groups to resolve conflicts through mediation, negotiation, promoting dialogue, reaching agreements, and developing a research base around these approaches. These are our tools of the trade. However, I believe we are less keen to engage in, and less good at working on the transformation of these conflicts, working at a deeper level for a significant change in attitudes, beliefs, values, relationships, culture and structure. I am not sure how much we actually try systematically to do this, either ourselves or through lobbying, though we use the term transformation quite

easily. With notable exceptions, we are, I believe, uneasy, and notably less skilled, working low profile in intractable situations, local or national, where there is unbalanced power and repression, though there is so much need to do so.

I am not clear about the extent to which this situation, if it is indeed the case, relates to the contradictions I have highlighted earlier between the apparently systemic global warfighting behaviour of our largest funders and the peacebuilding work we carry out, apparently without many qualms, on their behalf. However, the effects of this contradiction on our work, and how we evaluate that work, must surely be substantial.

I want to close with another short Sufi story, from the mystic Bayazid, told to me by Hizkias Assefa a wise highly experienced mediator and peacebuilder.

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 I realized that I had passed through half 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 be only my family and friends. Now that I am old and my days are numbered, I realize 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.

Well our movement is not yet old, but perhaps it is already time to pray his final prayer for ourselves.