

Reflections on the Comments: Responses and More Queries

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It was enormously affirming to read the responses to the lead article. We realised we were not alone: the issues we raised resonated even more widely than we had dared to hope. In addition to the articles in this Dialogue, we have received feedback through the website;¹ we have also heard from a good number of organisations which have held, or plan to hold, formal or informal conversations about the article, and we have helped with some of them. In this feedback, some were saying that the article was too critical – that we have portrayed the yet emerging peacebuilding field in too harsh a light. Some were saying that the article was in fact not critical enough in that it pointed to successes where the results have been mixed at best. For a minority, engagement with government was anathema; others have called for a more refined understanding of how states and global institutions work, and what the ways and consequences of engagement with governments and other actors are. Some gave us priceless quotes, such as calling for people “to stand up and speak out in a silent nonviolent revolution”.²

But overall, people have often talked about how this has given them an acceptable, non-confrontational opportunity to raise crucial matters in their organisation about values, strategy and goals. In the space of this short reflection paper, we cannot do justice to the many points raised. We propose therefore to note some of those which struck us most forcibly, draw attention to elements which were, surprisingly to us, absent and offer some additional thoughts.

¹ <http://lettertopeacebuilders.ning.com>. [All weblinks in this article accessed 13 January 2009.]

² In an email to the authors on 30 March 2008.

1. Key Points and Commonalities

Several issues resonated across articles, discussions and email responses. In fact, many are recognized as pertinent issues in the peacebuilding field and have been previously taken up by various Berghof Handbook articles.³ Many of these issues have prompted more interesting questions in our minds.

Definitions and Descriptions

A number of responses contributed to an effort to define what peacebuilding is and who is engaged in building peace. Alternative names have been offered, such as the Peace and Conflict Resolution Movement (Kriesberg); Peace Movement, as opposed to Peace Industry (Weitsch). There has been recognition that the field of peace work is much wider than it is often described as being. There are many actors beyond the usual peacebuilding ‘suspects’, be that ex-combatants or military, business people or radical political groups, who can become an important force for peace. Do these attempts at defining the boundary between those who are peacebuilders and those who are not mirror identity struggles that the community seems to experience within itself?

A number of responses touched upon definitions of peace, affirming that it is impossible to find one that is not contextually bound. But is it possible to find one that *is* contextually bound? Forging a joint definition of peace is arguably a key pillar of peacebuilding work, but is there a need for criteria for any such definition? An attempt to produce a ‘generic’ definition has recently been made by International Alert in its Programming Framework where they write: “peace is when people are anticipating and managing conflicts without violence, and are engaging in inclusive social change processes that improve the quality of life. They are doing so without compromising the possibility of continuing to do so in the future, or compromising the possibility of others to do so.”⁴ Are there any other parameters and characteristics of peace that should underlie a context-driven definition?

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Analysis and Context

A need to better understand the context has been highlighted in many of the responses. In the article by Chigas and Woodrow, this was linked to a finer understanding of communities – as a basic but often controversial building block of peacebuilding. In his response on the website, Michael Hammer highlighted the need for a more discerning understanding of elites, or power-holders, away from treating them as “monolithic, generally problematic, and manipulative”.⁵

Important as it is to understand the dynamics and drivers of each conflict, the acute influence of the wider global context has been highlighted by the economic crisis that has unfolded in the months since the original article was published. The crisis clearly has the potential to undermine much peacebuilding and other relevant work. How do we respond to this now, and plan for it in the future?

Funding

We have been offered examples of how excellent things have been done without any money, or on very limited or intermittent support. We have witnessed the perils of too much money skewing priorities, ownership and work ethic. We have seen how shifting funding priorities have undermined consistent ‘adding-up’ of peace work. Some of the difficulties around this have been reflected in

³ For a full list of contents see www.berghof-handbook.net.

⁴ Programming Framework for International Alert: Design, Monitoring and Evaluation, December 2007. For more information, please contact general@international-alert.org.

⁵ <http://lettertopeacebuilders.ning.com/forum/topics/2036517:Topic:341>.

Bozicevic's article: "how can someone with limited resources but infinite commitment trust others with limited commitment and infinite resources?" (in this volume, 71). To us, it seems there is a need for some urgent creative thinking on what good peacebuilding funding should look like.

Importance of Diversity

Both Kriesberg and Chigas and Woodrow made the crucial point that one of civil society's strongest assets is its diversity. In seeking greater impact and effectiveness we should not assume that coordination, or even uniformity of approach, is the best way: "diversity of roles, goals and agendas may be as important to Peace Writ Large as commonality of vision and understanding" (Chigas/Woodrow in this volume, 52). Their idea of focusing on linkages, suggesting awareness plus a variable level of inter-communication, seems a useful concept.

Learning

The emphasis on learning, and the distinctions between the different orders of learning, put forward by Hopp and Unger, are helpful. Yes, learning is central to our work – not an add-on, which can be dispensed with when time is short. Learning how we learn – the third order – remains, in our view also, relatively underemphasised in organisations working in and on conflict. And the need of such organisations to be aware of, and responsive to, the dynamics of external conflicts being played out in their own teams and processes is critical in relation to their own continued effectiveness, as well as the specific need for learning.

Technical vs. Transformative?

We have been challenged from several angles about the distinction between transformative and technical peacebuilding. Some found it disempowering – does 'technical' mean less worthwhile? Some insisted that even the technical in 'civil society' terms is infinitely bolder than the solutions favoured by (inter)governmental actors. Finally, some claimed that categorisations along similar lines have already been made. We keep searching for examples of transformative peacebuilding, especially where it is successfully scaled up, and its delicate relationship with the technical, and would be grateful for any further thoughts.

2. What We Found Missing in the Comments

In our opinion, in the wealth of comments and discussions two themes have been underemphasised: the dynamics of power and the potential of action research.

2.1 Dynamics of Power

Perhaps we should not have been surprised that the issues of power that we raised in the article have received a limited, if controversial response. For us, the questions relating to power were one of the key motivators to write the article. What power do peacebuilders and other actors have, and what are its sources? How does one use power legitimately and accountably in situations of considerable inequality and imbalance, in a way that would increase prospects for positive peace?

Some of the contributions and discussions we have had have suggested that it is difficult or even unhelpful to distinguish between peacebuilding and nonviolent movements for change. After all, commitment to nonviolence lies at the heart of peacebuilding for many. Nonviolent social movements (often referred to as civil resistance movements) however, apart from not using

violence, are also characterised by taking sides in a situation of significant power imbalance. Neutrality is therefore not the universal precondition of a peacebuilding engagement: it can mean complicity, making peace a ‘dirty’ word when those who work in the name of peace are perceived to be promoting a contested or dominant agenda. Or, alternatively, it can in other circumstances be interpreted as subversive. This does not mean that peacebuilders should all become partisan, activist and engage in explicit advocacy. But it does point to the need to better understand different types of power, where power lies and how it is used, and, for many of us, to be much more aware of – and willing to use – our own power, institutional and personal. In some situations this will indeed mean expanding our capacity to be more confrontational.

2.2 Action Research

Similarly, we were surprised, perhaps even a little disappointed, that the huge potential of action research, undertaken by practitioners at all levels in the course of their work, which we drew attention to in the article, did not evoke more substantial comment. Martina Fischer proposes it as a methodology for evaluations. It is also a form of inquiry that has proved successful both in making theories of change explicit, the need for which is underlined by Chigas and Woodrow, and in facilitating the three orders of learning, as described by Hopp and Unger.

However, in our view action research has a great deal more potential than this. Based as it is on two core principles: “to learn in the process of carrying out [one’s] practice and to do so in cooperation with others, testing and expanding [one’s] knowledge and experience, challenged and affirmed by others”,⁶ the potential of this form of research to build the all-round inner and outer capacity of practitioners as well as to generate new knowledge has been a revelation to us over the past few years.⁷ By putting the researcher at the centre of the research (as opposed to being eliminated as far as possible from it) it promotes and embodies self-awareness and reflexivity as core qualities essential to any work on conflict and change.

At its best, action research has huge advantages for many practitioners over more conventional peace studies courses and the quantitative research they tend to espouse, but there are very few places as yet where it can be done. Apart from the Applied Conflict Transformation Studies (ACTS) programme, currently operating in the Asia region and based at Pannasastra University in Cambodia, we are not aware of any other peace-related programmes of this nature, though the fields of education, public health and social work appear to be more fortunate in this regard.⁸

3. Open Questions and Challenges

There are two additional issues which we would like to introduce in concluding this response: one was omitted largely for reasons of space from the original article and the other was only mentioned in passing. The first one calls for a fundamental shift in public attitudes (as also proposed in Weitsch’s article), whereas the second brings us back to ourselves, and the relevance of what we will call inner work. We are hoping that the former will stimulate creative thinking on the message that peacebuilders can offer to other actors and the public at large. As for the latter, we believe this to be an essential component of any peacebuilding engagement.

⁶ Action Research: Core Topic Paper. Responding To Conflict, 2005, 27. Please contact enquiries@respond.org for availability.

⁷ See, for example, activities and publications by the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP) at the University of Bath (www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/index.html).

⁸ Some examples can be found in the *Educational Action Research Journal* published by the Collaborative Action Research Network (www.did.stu.mmu.ac.uk/carnnew/index.php), and Richard Winter and Carol Munn-Giddings (2001). *A Handbook for Action Research in Health and Social Care*. London: Routledge.

3.1 Changing the Frame of Mind: Taking Violence Prevention Seriously

Are we right to continue our public focus on peace and conflict, both difficult concepts to explain and mobilize around, rather than focusing on the prevention of violence? Would it not help to break through the fog of incomprehension about much that we do if we started to pathologise violence as we do, for example, disease? What difference would it make if our societies began to search as vigorously for ways to prevent violence in all its forms as they do now to prevent disease?⁹

We see many parallels between the two: both are human malfunctions leading to loss of wellbeing and life itself; both are treatable, and can be mitigated, up to a point; both are critical issues for the survival of humanity globally. There are many differences, too, but they are remediable. Disease is recognized everywhere as a problem and a priority, while violence is recognized as a problem only within some societies. Disease is recognized as a defeatable enemy; violence is mostly seen as inevitable, or even desirable. There is a massive global industry looking for cures for all manner of diseases, yet the equally massive industry relating to violence is mainly dedicated to finding more effective ways to promote it. In all this, the cost of ill health is calibrated and carefully examined while the real cost of violence tends to be ignored or downplayed – except by those who suffer from it.

It is important to remember that public views on health have changed massively over the past century. From being an individual issue with little or no state provision it has become a public issue. It has become clear that much disease can be eliminated and people as a result can live longer and more fulfilled lives. Massive investment has revolutionised the health and life-expectancy of much of the world's population as disease has been tackled in a concerted manner across the world. Public views on violence can change also, nudged on by the lives and work of many. As yet, though, most people do not think that much can be done about it, except increase one's own protection. Internally, societies fear violence and try to eliminate it, most often by repression – which only leads to its re-emergence. Externally, it is seen as largely inevitable and used widely as the ultimate weapon to achieve political goals. The means of violence are still a powerful sign of virility at the international conference table.

What could a new focus on open, direct violence entail? The enemy would no longer be 'them', but violence itself. Problems between people and nations would be addressed following the basic principle that violence only makes things worse. (How much evidence do we need to show that this is the case in the modern world?) If violence is learned – as scientific research tells us it is – then it can be unlearned, starting at home and in schools. Such a perspective also could not ignore the structures of violence. If we began to treat violence like we do disease, we would start to focus on its underlying dynamics. We would invest much more in research into the causes of violence and into methods of reducing and preventing it. We would use the internet and all high-tech approaches for violence prevention and reduction as we are doing now for health. As people looked into the causes of violence they would see that these lie in the wider political, social and economic context, as they do with disease. So they would be drawn into violence prevention by working on deeper structural issues such as rights, justice, environment, militarisation and prejudice. We would rigorously evaluate all methods of reducing violence, for cost and for their effect on the deeper structural causes. Conflict resolution methods would be seen as mainstream ways to avoid violence. Education would become crucial.

⁹ Violence is here taken to mean open, direct violent behaviour (both war and physical violence) on the one hand, and threat, intimidation and repression on the other.

3.2 Addressing Both Sides of the Coin: Inner Work

The original Open Letter, and therefore also our lead article to this Dialogue, focused on visible, external aspects of peacebuilding. With hindsight, we could have drawn more attention to the way in which the recent developments in our field have tended to ignore the inner in favour of the outer. It seems to the authors that we cannot do this work well, cannot respond creatively to our changing context if we do not make time to also be in touch with ourselves and our own sources of hope. The same need has been emphasised in this volume by both Weitsch and Bozicevic. Peace has always been as much about internal change as about an external one. When Gandhi urged us to “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? For us it is about maximising our inner resources. It means recognizing 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. We build our own inner peace, as we build theirs, or we are doing neither. Without it, we risk being simply a clock face, without any mechanism inside. Working on this inner dimension helps us become more emotionally literate. 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. Growing self-awareness and depth tend to lead to greater curiosity, so a person may read more, including the literature of our field, and write more too. It might become irresistible to learn from what we do and to help our colleagues do so too.

What we are all trying to do was neatly expressed by Bozicevic: bringing “the breeze of normal life” to countries and communities who have lost that sense of ongoing wellbeing and normality and want it again, now. As this Dialogue has underlined, that takes at least two things: critical and politically-aware analysis of our strategies in context, and invigorating our capacities. The responses have dealt more firmly with the analytical side of the coin, but we would like to end with the equally crucial individual, more spiritual dimension. This story comes from the Sufi mystic Bayazid. It is related here 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 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

¹⁰ From an article by Hizkias Assefa which elaborates on this theme, see *Wajibu: Journal of Social and Ethical Concern*, 22 (1), April-May 2007. Published by Dr. Gerald J. Wanjohi, Nairobi, Kenya; please email wakurayag@yahoo.com for a copy.

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See also...

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- Martina Fischer and Beatrix Schmelzle, *Introduction*
- Simon Fisher and Lada Zimina, *Just Wasting Our Time? Provocative Thoughts for Peacebuilders*
- Louis Kriesberg, *Making Good Use of the Time: Contributions and Dilemmas of Non-governmental Actors in Peacebuilding*
- Diana Chigas and Peter Woodrow, *Envisioning and Pursuing Peace Writ Large*
- Martina Weitsch, *Mobilizing Public Opinion for Peace: The Next Challenge for the Peacebuilding Communities*
- Goran Bozicevic, *Reflections on Peacebuilding from Croatia*
- Ulrike Hopp and Barbara Unger, *Time to Learn: Expanding Organisational Capacities in Conflict Settings*
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Please note: An online forum for further discussion has been established by Lada Zimina and Simon Fisher at www.lettertopeacebuilders.ning.com.