

Making Good Use of the Time: Contributions and Dilemmas of Non-governmental Actors in Peacebuilding

A Response by Louis Kriesberg

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1. Introduction

Simon Fisher and Lada Zimina have written an exciting article, rich in ideas and observations, each of which is worth extended discussion.¹ They quite properly begin by citing many recent changes in the global situation that mark enhancements in peaceful circumstances, as well as grave global crises. The elements of progress toward increased peace, and the reasons for them, deserve attention; this can help assess the contributions that non-governmental peacebuilders have made to peace in the world and guide efforts to play a greater role in the future.

Since the end of the Cold War, the incidence and severity of international and civil wars (with and without a government being a party to the war) have somewhat declined (Human Security Centre 2005; Human Security Report Project 2008). Increasingly, wars have been settled by negotiations rather than by unilateral impositions. Certainly the end of the Cold War has contributed to these changes. Stopping the support that the Soviet Union and the United States governments had given to antagonistic sides in Central American countries and many parts of Africa resulted in settling many seemingly intractable wars. The transformation and then dissolution of the Soviet Union enabled the UN and other international governmental organisations to more effectively intervene in many countries and avert or stop deadly conflicts.

¹ In preparing to write my response, I shared the lead article (Fisher/Zimina 2009) with several colleagues working in a wide variety of settings and invited their comments. Those who responded uniformly thought the issues raised were important and conveyed various reactions that have helped inform my contribution. The persons with whom I communicated include John Burdick, Bruce W. Dayton, Victoria Fontan, Susan Allen Nan, Joyce Neu, Marie Pace, Richard E. Rubenstein, Robert A. Rubinstein and Carolyn M. Stephenson.

This also opened up more opportunities for non-governmental peacebuilders. Significantly, the Soviet transformation itself owes much to the work of non-governmental peace and conflict organisations and to governmental applications of contemporary conflict resolution ideas (Evangelista 1999).

The Soviet transformation was largely the result of many internal characteristics and developments, but global trends also aided it and those trends continue to manifest themselves, which helps account for declines in mass violence since the Cold War ended. These global trends include growing economic interdependence, intensifying channels of communication, growing consensus about norms relating to human rights and multiplying transnational governmental and non-governmental organisations.

In the 1980s a burgeoning peace and conflict resolution (PCR) social movement had emerged in the US, which soon became global. This movement includes many social movement organisations, widespread public support, education, training and practice conducted in private and public institutions, and in some arenas legally sanctioned conflict resolution procedures. Like the women's movement, with which it overlaps to some degree, the PCR movement, broadly understood, is diffusing widely, even as counter movements demonstrate resistance. The PCR movement is consistent with the earlier identified global trends, which is why it is flourishing. It also reinforces the peacebuilding implications of those global trends.

The rapid growth of the PCR movement can be attributed to internal as well as contextual developments (Kriesberg 2008). Relevant early work goes back to the period following World War I and many of the basic ideas in the field were generated after World War II, in the 1950s and 1960s; but they had limited visibility, support and application. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, the practice of conflict resolution and the explosion of alternative dispute resolution, initially in the United States, spurred widespread growth of the PCR movement. Colleges and universities established new graduate programmes in conflict resolution and their graduates began to be employed in local, national and international organisations. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation provided funding for theory-building centres at universities, for applied projects and for building professional associations (Hewlett Foundation 2005). It appears that what Fisher and Zimina identify as technical practices played a vital role in the rapid growth of the PCR movement. Their adoption helped provide the visible alternative to adversarial and coercive methods of conflict, which was helpful in the field of peace and conflict research and in peace movement mobilizations.

For all the progress that has been made, the world is still beset by many destructive conflicts and injustices, rightfully noted by Fisher and Zimina. Since September 11, 2001, the salience of violent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq and of attacks on civilians in the Middle East and elsewhere has spiked. The actions of al Qaeda and associated organisations and of the US government have been affected and in some ways assisted by the global trends noted above. But at a more fundamental level, they have been out of synchronisation with those trends. I believe that the failures of al Qaeda and of President George W. Bush's administration are due to acting inconsistently with many of the profound changes underway in the world (Kriesberg 2007). The evident failures should provide new opportunities for the PCR movement and the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in it. In *Section 3* of my comments, I discuss obstacles to seizing those opportunities and ways to overcome them. In *Section 2*, I want to take a closer look at some of the concepts that Fisher and Zimina use in their analysis.

2. The Concepts of Peacebuilders and of Transformation

Two key concepts central to this discussion – peacebuilders and transformation – require clarification. The word ‘peacebuilders’ can have several meanings.² Fisher and Zimina at the outset define peacebuilders as “all those who see themselves as working for peace, justice and development” (in this volume, 13). Later, they write that a host of actors are peacebuilders, including government officials as well as civil society organisations. However, in their article, they generally refer to local and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) that typically engage in intermediary and other non-partisan actions, particularly in settings beset by violent conflicts or where people are recovering from them. Furthermore, Fisher and Zimina focus their discussion upon INGOs which adhere to the ideas and practices of contemporary conflict resolution. This usage is perfectly fine, but problems arise when that is not made explicit and not applied consistently.

Many governmental and non-governmental actors engage in mediation, negotiation, dialogue and other practices that are wholly consistent with contemporary conflict resolution. They often do so without identifying themselves as ‘peacebuilders’ or as self-conscious implementers of problem-solving conflict resolution ideas and practices (even if they have been unwarily influenced by them). Indeed, many of the ideas in the field of conflict resolution derive from analysing actual practices of effective diplomats, political leaders and traditional chiefs. Outside peace workers may do their best work by helping elicit the traditional folk ways of settling conflicts in particular localities.³ Finally, many officials and other persons with authority carry out conventionally recognized negotiations and even mediation in a manner that is highly coercive and with little regard to the concerns of other parties in the conflict. They may claim to be peacebuilders and peacemakers, but many practitioners in the field of peace and conflict resolution would not regard such designations as correct.

In the field of conflict analysis and resolution, the concept of transformation has usually referred to the change of a conflict from one characterized by intractability and by destructive interactions to one that is resolved or, if continued, is waged without violence and by more constructive means (Crocker et al. 2005; Kriesberg et al. 1989). Fisher and Zimina use a broader meaning of the term, to include a societal or even global change from a system of domination and violence to one in which that is largely absent and where the relations among adversaries are peaceful and just. There is great value in considering such macro settings since they affect the course of the many particular fights that are waged within those systems. Agreements that settle large-scale civil wars, but do not change the conditions that generated the war, often are short-lived (Paris 2004).

If peacebuilders, however they are defined, try to specify what a new transformed society or world should be they are likely to seem presumptuous. Fisher and Zimina usually refer to general conditions that need to be transformed, such as economic injustice, denial of rights and of participation, and environmental destruction. How that is to come about and what a transformed system would look like, however, are likely to be matters of contention. Even persons in the PCR movement probably differ about the effects of different economic market systems on standards of living.

In any case, certainly much more research can and should be done to analyse what sustains societal and global systems that are characterized by high levels of domination, injustice and inequalities. In addition, peacebuilding efforts can and should be undertaken to strengthen the forces that would reduce those conditions. Such efforts often involve joining or allying with partisans on

² In UN terminology, for example, peacebuilding refers to particular stages of conflicts and is distinguished from peacemaking and peacekeeping.

³ This is discussed most notably in Lederach 1995.

one side in a conflict. This goes against the grain for many people in the conflict resolution field who emphasize improving the process of reaching decisions and agreements rather than the substance of the decision or agreement. Attention to the equity of conflict outcomes and to positive peace has been of higher concern in the fields of peace studies and peace research (Cortright 2008; Stephenson 2008). For example, during the 1950s and 1960s many studies were made of the military-industrial complex and how it functioned to sustain militarised international relations. In addition, the social movement campaign for civil rights effectively used nonviolent methods in the American South. Its prominent leader, Martin Luther King Jr., drew from Mohandas Ghandi's practices and ideas in leading the Indian independence movement. Furthermore, in 1973, Gene Sharp published his influential work providing a theoretical basis for the power of nonviolent action and extensive documentation of its effectiveness (Sharp 1973; for an overview see Dudouet 2008).

Fisher and Zimina make a valuable contribution to fostering peace by examining the differences between what they call technical and transformative peacebuilding approaches. That is an important analytic distinction, but as they stress, many activities actually embody both approaches to some degree. I agree that greater attention to long-term transformational consequences of peace and conflict resolution practices is desirable. I also think it is useful to be clear about what kind of transformation is being considered, whether it refers to a conflict, a society, or the world. The magnitude of transformations also can vary greatly from minor reforms to radical re-structuring; while reforms can be trivial, striving for extreme transformational objectives can have counterproductive consequences.

The PCR movement includes a variety of advocacy organisations, often a necessary component in transformations at the societal and global levels. They have long existed and produced many of the fundamental gains in social justice in the last two centuries relating to working conditions, voting rights and reducing inequalities for women or subordinated ethnic groups. In recent decades, these and related issues have been contested by new social movement organisations. This is evident in the advancement of norms and practices to protect human rights and in grassroots organisations struggling for political rights, autonomy and in some cases political independence. The successful struggle to end Apartheid in South Africa, waged by the African National Congress and its allies around the world, exemplifies how conflicts can be waged relatively constructively, even in terrible circumstances.

3. Specific Obstacles

In this section, I discuss specific problems relating to the work of NGOs, which apply conflict analysis and resolution ideas and methods to prevent, stop, limit, de-escalate, settle and recover from destructive conflicts. I give particular attention to the ways their actions relate to the transformation of destructive conflicts and also to societal and global transformations that entail higher levels of wellbeing.

3.1 Relations with Governments and Other Powerful Actors

Fisher and Zimina write of the deference to power by members of INGOs that deters transformation.⁴ This does exist to some degree, but the relations that INGOs and other non-governmental groups in the PCR movement have with governments and other powerful actors are highly complex and highly varied. Under certain conditions some deference may be appropriate,

⁴ INGOs here refers to NGOs that function internationally; in earlier years it usually referred to NGOs that were structured internationally. Social movement organisations (SMOs) refer to NGOs that are elements of social movements. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are NGOs through which citizens are engaged in social-political matters.

although often it creates dilemmas. Thus, INGOs often require at least the permission of governments to pursue their work, but governmental constraints can significantly impede their activities, which sometimes require them to choose among not so good alternatives.

It is important to recognize that governments vary greatly: some are run by tyrants and others are headed by leaders who are responsive to their constituents and have considerable legitimacy. Some governments have relatively large resources of coercive and non-coercive kinds, while others have few such resources that can be applied domestically or internationally. How an INGO should engage with a government to advance peace therefore depends on the kind of government involved and on a host of other conditions, including their own characteristics and goals.

A particular set of problems arises when the governmental leaders of an extremely powerful country are pursuing policies that certain INGOs regard as antithetical to their values and work. This occurs for some Northern-based INGOs in relations with the US government. At times, US-based organisations have acted in solidarity with groups opposed by the US government; for example, this was the case in Ronald Reagan's presidency for groups countering his administration's actions relating to Cuba, Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador.⁵

An important new problem arises from the great expansion of governmental funding of INGOs that assist in humanitarian relief, economic development and particularly in conflict resolution endeavours (Fischer 2006). To some degree, in particular circumstances, the INGOs become agents of governments that provide the funding. Dilemmas certainly arise insofar as the policies of a government appear to be incompatible with the values or priorities of members of peacebuilding NGOs.

The recent US policies pursued in the Global War on Terror and the war and occupation in Iraq have aroused deep concerns among many US-based NGOs. US government funds have increased for peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq and many other areas. Members of the PCR movement differ greatly in the degree and form of resistance they undertake against US policies and also in the degree of cooperation they are willing to carry out with different US agencies in various settings.⁶ Intense disagreements have been voiced among psychologists and anthropologists at professional meetings about the ethical and the practical consequences of different kinds of engagement with the US government (American Anthropological Association 2007; Gusterson 2007). This was also the case during the US engagement in the war in Vietnam. Considerable consensus developed that at a minimum, covert connections and work were inappropriate for universities.

On the other hand, societal and global transformation must entail changes in the way government officials think and act. NGOs and other members of the PCR movement need to consider the ways that relevant research findings, experiences and insights can be effectively communicated to political figures. Direct contacts in various settings can be important in this regard. The United States Institute of Peace, funded by the US Congress, was established in 1984 and has become a significant bridge between government officials and members of the conflict resolution field.

A peculiar set of problems arise when some governments or other powerful actors adopt particular conflict resolution words or techniques but apply them in ways that many in the PCR movement regard as inappropriate or even harmful to advancing positive peace. This seems to be an issue with claims by George W. Bush's administration that its efforts to promote change in certain countries will help protect the rights of women and that its support of nonviolent revolutions will bring democracy to countries ruled by authoritarian leaders. Groups within the PCR movement are generally wary of these actions, but differ about how to relate to them in particular times and places.

⁵ In addition to the sanctuary movement, which protected refugees from Central America in the United States, Pastors for Peace and Witness for Peace were founded and continue to function (Smith et al. 1997).

⁶ The Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR) at George Mason University in the United States has held several workshops on these matters in the last few years; see Rubenstein 2008.

An unfortunate consequence of this situation is that on occasion independent INGOs and persons working for women's rights or for nonviolent efforts to bring about democratic change are wrongly charged as doing the work of the CIA or other US government agencies.⁷

I believe that differences among the diverse groups in the PCR movement and among the NGOs within it are inevitable and in many ways useful for the transformation of conflicts, societies and the world. A kind of division of labour among the many entities in the PCR movement has evolved. It should be more consciously and energetically developed. The diverse entities have different effectiveness in working with people at each level within adversary groups and the societal context. They vary in the work they can do at different stages of a conflict and they differ in the skills and the resources they can bring to transforming a conflict, a society or the world.

3.2 Funding

The purpose of most NGOs is to serve the interests of their members, as is the case for business and professional associations, trade unions, ethnic advocacy groups and churches. Funding for such organisations generally comes from their own members. Many NGOs, however, work to do good for non-members, they are advocacy organisations trying to change patterns of conduct deemed to be morally wrong, or service organisations helping people injured by conflict and injustice. The source of funding then is not so obvious or certain. Another major source of funding, the primary one for profit-making organisations, is payment for services or products they provide. Additionally, NGOs in the PCR movement generally receive funds from individuals and foundations that share the concerns of the NGOs' missions. However, the major foundation benefactor to conflict resolution work, the Hewlett Foundation, has ended the grants it made for many years (Hewlett Foundation 2005). On the other hand, as noted earlier, governments and international governmental organisations have become increasingly important funders.

In these circumstances, the search for funding poses several severe problems. Raising money and applying for grants consumes considerable resources of NGOs in the PCR movement. Dependence on external sources such as governments and major contributors tends to influence the direction that the NGOs work in ways that are not always desirable. Sometimes financial support from a particular primary source can hamper working with certain other groups and so interfere with effective conflict transformation.

These various problems may be alleviated by NGOs developing multiple sources of funding. Larger NGOs are able to do this more effectively and are larger because they do so.⁸ One path to becoming larger and performing a wider range of tasks is for a few NGOs to combine, by cooperating, merging, partnering or becoming closely networked. Official organisations and foundations might more often form cooperative alliances in making contributions and grants, spreading risks and sharing opportunities. This might also enhance the perceived and actual autonomy of NGOs in their work.

3.3 Competition and Dissensus

Collaboration and cooperation among NGOs and others within the PCR movement is crucial to transformation at the level of a particular conflict, a society or the world. The inevitable competition and differences in approaches among these organisations can hamper cooperation, but this is not necessarily so. Some values and interests are shared by most participants in the

⁷ This has been most egregiously the case with malicious allegations against Gene Sharp and Stephen Zunes. See www.aeinstein.org and www.stephenzunes.com.

⁸ Organisations that have made progress in this regard include the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and Search for Common Ground. See www.iucn.org and www.sfcg.org.

movement, such as believing in the importance of respecting all humans and of minimizing violence. Furthermore, they can engage in ways that foster mutual understanding and joint as well as complementary actions.

As more and more intervening governmental and non-governmental organisations appear at the scene of major conflicts, the relations among them and the impact of their relations expand and would benefit from coordination (Kriesberg 1996; Nan 2008). The engagement of many organisations allows for specialized and complementary programmes, but can also produce unwanted rivalry, redundancy and confusion. Adversaries may try to co-opt some intervening organisations or exploit differences among them. To enhance the possible benefits and minimize the difficulties, various coordinating steps may be taken, including informal ad hoc exchanges of information, regular meetings among organisations in the field and having one organisation serve as ‘lead’ agency.

Overall, as Fisher and Zimina discuss, there is a need for greater interaction and exchange of ideas among members of INGOs and other organisations engaged in building peace. The infrastructure for such relations began to be built many years ago – for example, the International Peace Research Association (IPRA) was established in 1964. National associations of practitioners, researchers and teachers in the field of peace and conflict resolution have been established in many countries and regions.⁹ In addition, numerous workshops, conferences and other gatherings focus on particular topics in this field.

Many institutions foster transnational work, bringing people from many countries to work together for extended periods. For example, the UN’s Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, which was created in 2001, works toward preventing violent conflict and natural disasters and supports recovery efforts from conflicts and disasters geared towards establishing the foundations for sustainable peace and gender equality. The UN for many years has sponsored international conferences pertaining to particular problems which have also generated forums for INGO gatherings. These activities need to be more visible to the public at large; that visibility would make the use of the peace and conflict resolution approach seem more plausible and attractive.¹⁰

3.4 Vision and Values

This Dialogue and related discussions reflect important developments in the PCR movement and particularly within the field of peace and conflict research. There is greater attention to conflict prevention and to establishing new systems of participatory governance to minimize unproductive and destructive conflict. These developments are related to the elements of a shared vision and common values that are emerging and to the growing view that conflict transformation is central to the field of CR (Botes 2003; Kriesberg 2006; Lederach 1997).

As Fisher and Zimina point out, however, peacebuilders’ research in the North tends to look at the sources of wars in distant countries, ignoring the role of multinational corporations and the militarised policies of the Northern governments. I certainly concur that much more research needs to be done on the military-industrial-political-media complex in the United States and in other major countries, including China and Russia. I think the research should also examine efforts to counter the policies favouring the dominance of leading circles in those countries.

The peacebuilding work of INGOs based in the North has not been well linked with what NGOs and others in the North try to do in order to change the structures that support policies that are conducive to violence and injustice at home and internationally. For transformation to occur at the societal and global levels, NGOs and other organisations in the PCR movement should be more

⁹ In the US, there is for example the Association for Conflict Resolution; see www.acrnet.org.

¹⁰ *Editors’ note:* For the European Union context, see also Martina Weitsch’s contribution to this Dialogue (59-67).

closely connected. They should also reach out to organisations that do not regard themselves as being in the PCR movement but that have interests and values which make them possible allies. The civil society includes traditional NGOs, such as trade unions, farmers' organisations, churches and other voluntary associations that need to be part of transformations. The role of governments and of armed national and transnational organisations cannot be wished away in dealing with large-scale conflicts. Differences within and among them deserve attention and relations with them should not be ignored.

Finally, I want to make some comments about the possible role of academia in the transformation process. Faculty members of colleges and universities can expand the roles that they play in that process. They may not produce the major visionaries in this movement, but they can educate the future generations so that they know alternative ways of meeting the crises that confront them. They can play the indispensable bridging roles between the various groups in the PCR movement and those adhering to traditional thinking and practices. They can undertake the much-needed research about societal and global transformation and how resistance to the transformation is overcome. This will be aided by close connections with the rapidly evolving practices within the PCR movement. One way that this may be facilitated is by helping to provide the advanced training and experience that Fisher and Zimina identify as being needed by NGO peacebuilders. Mid-career programmes and advanced fellowship opportunities for practitioners may be useful instruments in this regard.

4. Conclusion

As must be evident, I believe that great progress has been made and continues to be made by INGOs and other NGOs in the work of building peace. I think there are reasons to believe that progress will continue, perhaps even more rapidly, and I have suggested some ways that progress might be enhanced. It is true that we humans face great challenges and threatening crises, even if people in the world disagree about the nature and priority to be assigned to them. What is distressing at present is that many of the huge threats have been generated by humans, but that means they can be overcome by humans. There are better ways to meet the challenges than are generally being applied. The evident failure of extremism and reliance on violence in the last few years should provide an impetus to turn away from the policies that have proved to be so disastrous and begin to adopt the approach pursued by the PCR movement.

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See also...

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