

Building Peace – it really is about “Thinking Globally, Acting Locally!”

By Hedley Abernethy, Catholic Relief Services

The Challenge of Building Peace

In my chosen field of peacebuilding and conflict transformation I have the pleasure of being able to associate with many intelligent and worldly-wise people. We wax lyrical about theories of conflict and social change, to critique and extol peacebuilding programs and to generally sound very smart about the work we do. Yet the question that vexes us most is this: “What exactly is peacebuilding?”

You would imagine that this question is the easiest of all to answer. The difficulty is not that it is so esoteric or philosophical that it defies definition; the difficulty is that it is so fundamental to our very being that our attempts to define peacebuilding usually end up being overly academic and are a disservice to real peacebuilding. While building peace can be difficult it is not necessarily as complicated as we think. Of course there are many, many reasons why people are in conflict and therefore many ways in which that conflict can be resolved and transformed but ultimately the following is true:

- We as human beings are relational creatures;
- Relationships can be difficult;
- Relationships can be broken; and
- Broken relationships can be healed.

This for me is the essence of peacebuilding. If I were to cite a more comprehensive definition of peacebuilding, I would use John Paul Lederach's who states that

“Peacebuilding refers to the long-term project of building peaceful, stable communities and societies. This requires building on a firm foundation of justice and reconciliation. How we build on that foundation is very important. The process needs to strengthen and restore relationships and transform unjust institutions and systems. The focus on relationships and the process of how we achieve justice and build peace is unique to peacebuilding.”¹

Lederach's assertion is that true peacebuilding requires at least three elements - a long term commitment, a restoration of broken relationships and restructuring of unjust systems within societies.

Peacemaking, peacekeeping or peacebuilding?

I am constantly reminded that words have meaning. That is also so in the case of defining peacebuilding.

Peacebuilding is not the same as peacekeeping. *Peacekeeping* is action taken that tends to stop cycles of violence between armed groups using a variety of means, more usually ensuring warring factions are kept apart. Rarely do peacekeepers ask why a conflict started and how it can be resolved. Similarly, *peacemaking* tends to solve problems rather than repairing broken relationships. Peacemakers tend to take an approach that ensures each side is given something of what they require to end the violence without necessarily exploring the roots of the conflict.

Peacebuilding however, seeks to “prevent, reduce, transform and help people recover from violence in all forms. It empowers people to foster relationships at all levels that sustain them and their environment.”² These definitions are more than semantics. Many peace agreements have failed because they sought solely to end violence rather than make inquiry as to the root of the violence. Abdicating the need to restore and maintain healthy relationships is a band-aid approach to conflict mitigation. As an untreated wound that is merely covered with a bandage will develop complications so unresolved conflicts will reemerge bigger and more deadly than before.

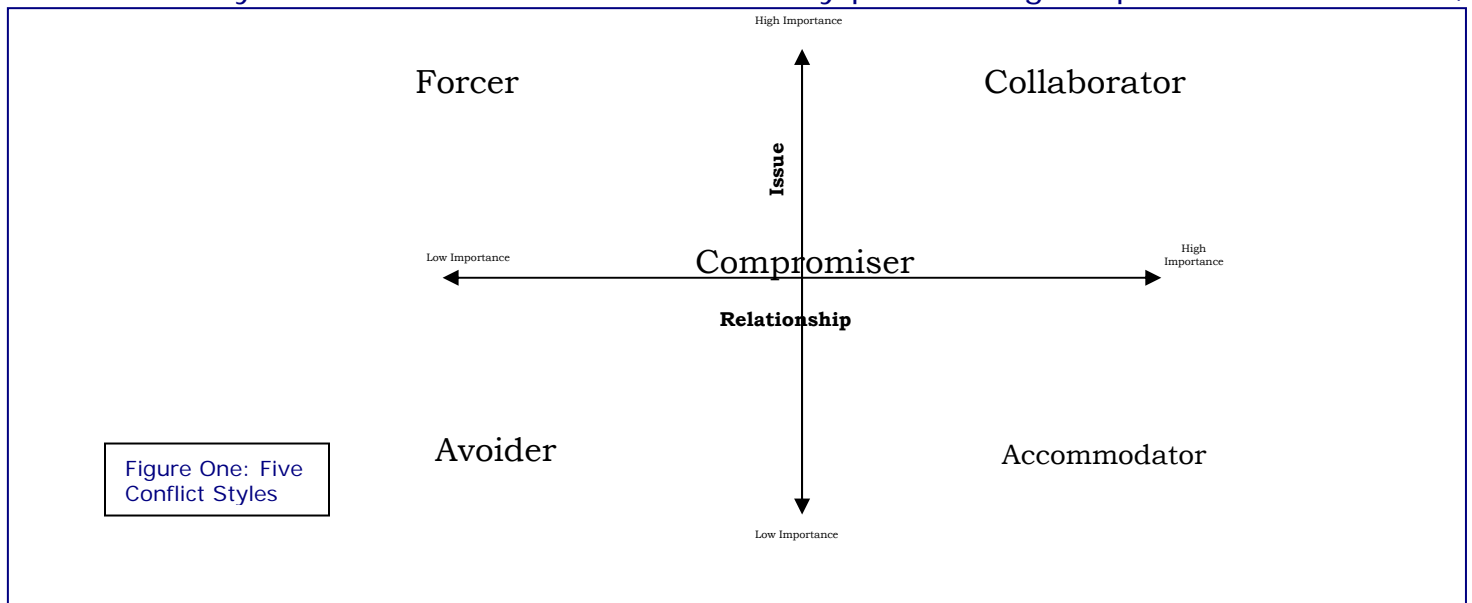
Conflict as a force for change.

The word “conflict” has been used many times throughout this paper. Let me make two assertions: conflict is not necessarily a bad thing *and* avoiding conflict does not resolve conflict. It could also be said that there is correlation between how individuals respond to interpersonal conflict and conflict between and among groups. Noting the similarity between responses to conflict by individuals and by groups, Blake and Mouton suggested that there are essentially five “conflict styles” which individuals and indeed groups can adopt namely:

- Accommodating;
- Competing or Forcing.
- Avoiding
- Collaborating/ Cooperating;
- Compromising.³

Blake and Mouton suggest that the conflict style we (singularly or collectively) adopt is dependent on what we think is more important: being right or being in right relationship. In other words, is the issue more important than the relationship or is the relationship more important than the issue? This can be illustrated in figure 1.

Let us say that an individual or even a society places a high importance on an issue,



there may be a tendency to try to force others to agree with a position without

consultation. If a relationship is damaged, that damage is merely collateral. On the other hand, if the relationship is seen as more important than the issue being contested, there may be a tendency to try to accommodate the views of the other.

In instances where the issue is unimportant and the relationship also unimportant, there is a tendency to avoid the conflict and in cases where the issue AND the relationship are important a tendency to collaborate.

Although seen as the hallowed ground for peace agreements the position of compromising is precisely where we would imagine it would be – right in the middle. Compromisers tend to care somewhat about the issues and somewhat about the relationships. This is what makes many peace agreements tenuous. A less than total regard for restoring broken relationships will inevitably result in the conflict reigniting. Also, those issues for which compromises have been found may turn out to be more important than signatories to agreements previously thought.

In summary, if we seek to not only resolve conflict but also transform it, we need to acknowledge two facts: issues are important and relationships are important.

Where is peacebuilding actually carried out?

Received wisdom maintains a notion that leaders of society whether they are politicians, warlords or military leaders are the people who actually bring about peace. There is also a school of thought that believes that peace will never break out unless the grassroots community is engaged in the process. Both are true – and then some. John Paul Lederach states that peacebuilding must happen at three levels of society. The top level (which includes those politicians and warlords) the bottom level (the grassroots of any community in conflict) and a middle level- essentially those within society who are the eyes and have the ear of the other two sections of that society.

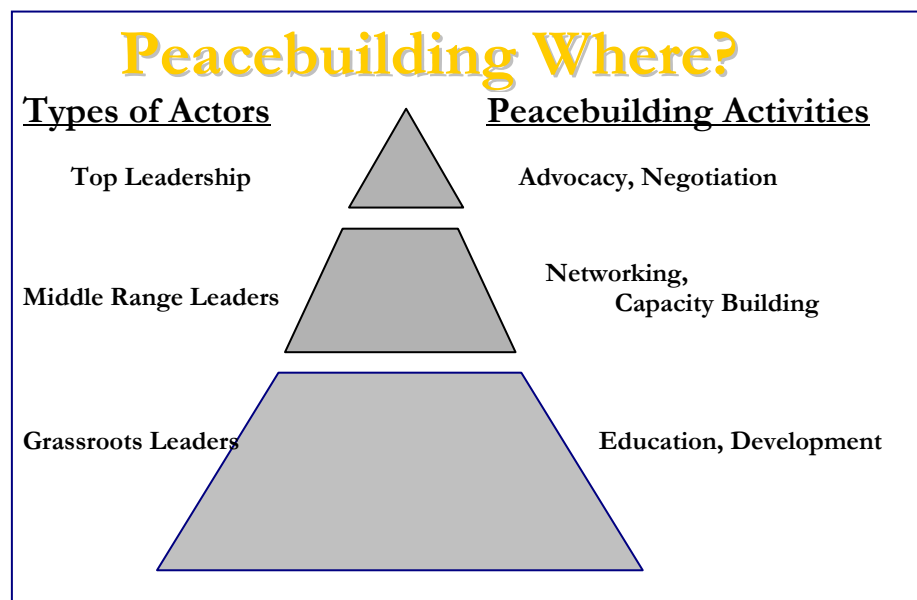


Figure Two: Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies. JPI 1997⁴.

While it is relatively simple to blame politicians for failings in peace agreements, the imperative is that all levels of society must be involved in peace processes for any

agreement to stick. As a peace agreement may result in the resolution of a conflict and an end to violence, the agreement is simply the beginning of a transformation of a conflict, a transformation that may take many years. As a guide, Lederach stated in a speech in Belfast City Hall in 1993 – some five years before the Belfast Peace Agreement was signed – that it takes as long to get out of a conflict as it does to get into it. Even if we simply take the outbreak of physical violence as our starting point, Lederach is suggesting that for the twenty-eight or so years of bombings and shootings in Northern Ireland it will take twenty-eight years to get out of that conflict. As the peace agreement was signed in 1998, we can look forward to some sense of true peace in Northern Ireland around about the year 2026, proof if it were need that the act of building peace takes a long term-commitment by all those involved in the conflict.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would return to one of my earlier points about the nature of relationships, namely

- We as human beings are relational creatures;
- Relationships can be difficult;
- Relationships can be broken; and
- Broken relationships can be healed.

This is as true of major national conflicts and civil wars as it is of our own interpersonal relationships. Understanding the symbiotic relationship between an individual and the society in which it lives helps to more fully understand peace and peacebuilding. Individuals can shape societal culture as societies can influence the individual. Put simply, how *we* handle conflict can often reflect how *society* handles conflict. If we feel that those who harm us, physically, emotionally or even doctrinally, must be punished in order that we can see that retribution or even revenge can be achieved, we can fully understand why 1 in every 100 adults in the United States is in prison or why the State of Israel chose a military option to eradicate Hamas at the start of this year. Yet, the truth is, it is extremely difficult to find a precedent where the use of violence has ever ended a conflict.

If we believe that relationships and healing broken relationships is paramount, then we are led to follow what can be a more difficult option of seeing those who upset or even contradict our worldview and values-system as human beings; we should then seek ways to understand rather than condemn. This applies as much to abortion rights or comprehensive immigration reform as it does to the bloodiest acts of violence perpetrated in the name of protecting one's own security.

Pope Paul VI said "If you want peace, work for justice." In most modern systems of justice, "justice" is seen as a method of retribution; a wrongdoer must be punished for their offense. Modest consideration may be given to the context of the offense or the offender. Certainly, little or no consideration is given to the needs of the victim or the relationship between the victim and the offender. If we continue with the assertion that relationship in peacebuilding is important, this must also be the case in terms of how and why we achieve justice.

Many individuals and societies have wrestled with this attempt to understand acts of violence that has left them traumatized physically and/ or emotionally. Yet many,

recognizing the need to be in relationship have tried, at least, to understand why another person would put them through this suffering. For example, the Parents Circle – Families Forum, a group of Palestinians and Israelis whose commonality is that each of its members have been bereaved as result of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict have sought a way to end the conflict through understanding the pain and the anger of the other. Its members have said that their respective political leaders alone will not bring an end to this seemingly intractable conflict. Rather, it is the work of individuals, who care enough about each other who will bring peace to this troubled land.

This is the challenge of building peace, that it is the responsibility of each of us, a process and a product over which we have control every day of our lives and in every relationship we live.

¹ Lederach, John Paul Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies (USIP:1997)

² Schirch, Lisa The Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding (Good Books:2004)

³ Blake, Robert R. and Jane S. Mouton Intergroup Problem Solving in Organizations from theory to practice. (in The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations. (Brooks/ Cole: 1979)

⁴ Lederach, Ibid.