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Addressing Social Change in Situations of Violent Conflict: A Practitioner's Perspective

A Response by

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1. Introduction: The Challenge of *Social* Change

Experience of diverse conflict situations has demonstrated that the practitioners of conflict resolution need to confront the issue of social change if they hope to address the prevention or resolution of violent conflicts, and deter their recurrence.

The compelling images of violent conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, the Americas, Eurasia and Asia have become part of our daily lives. In this brief reflection on Christopher Mitchell's conceptual enquiry, it seems worthwhile to focus on insights gained from particular conflict regions in past years to shed light on the relationship between *social* change and violent conflict, while exploring more effective approaches to building peace.

In situations of violent conflict, social change – or the lack of it – often provides the key to better understanding their protracted character. It also provides a perspective that leads one to address the underlying factors of the conflict and to explore approaches to transform situations of social violence. Those who take up arms often argue that the change they seek is best achieved by the use or threat of force. The deep-rooted causes that give rise to armed struggles are often found in particular contexts where inclusive processes are absent – leading to human rights violations, exclusion from meaningful participation in politics, the lack of respect for minorities or diverse identities and inequality in the distribution of wealth, which are among the factors that fuel armed conflict.

Profound social change, it is argued, will come about only by putting pressure on those unwilling or unable to yield to the needs and aspirations of vulnerable populations. Social change thus involves processes and policies that result in modifications, or the overhaul, of structures or institutions so that they better respond to the needs and aspirations of the sectors of society who seek their transformation. Changes can manifest themselves in the attitudes and behaviours of conflict parties, in the composition of the political leadership and their policies, and in the country's social structures. Moreover, social change is often a process that involves the rebuilding of broken relationships and the crafting of more responsive institutions that need to be sustained over time.

Box 1: Reflecting on Peacebuilding Experiences Related to Social Change

I would like to share the story of some personal encounters that provide a glimpse into why those engaged in building peace – if they are to sustain their effort over time – need to confront the issue of social change, now more than ever.[1]

1. This essay builds on the author's involvement in peace processes in the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Nepal and other areas of the world. Regularly updated reflection papers by the author, from which the following stories are drawn, are available on International Alert's website: www.international-alert.org, e.g. "On the Unfinished Struggle for Peace in Nepal: Reflecting on Conversations with a Maoist Leader" (reflection paper June 2003, updated June 2006). Additional sources are: "Building Lasting Peace in Aceh in the Aftermath of the Devastation Caused by the 2004 Tsunami and the Protracted Civil War" (unpublished Alert manuscript, January 2006); "Transforming Humanitarian Crisis into Opportunities for Peace in Kashmir: From Shared Tragedy to Steps Towards Peace" (presentation at the Second International Peace Conference on Kashmir, 15-16 March 2006, London, UK).

In Aceh, Indonesia…

In December 2005, I met Muhajir Ibrahim (a former university student of engineering who was then driving a United Nations vehicle) in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. He told me the story of the day he saw the waves come in, wave upon giant wave. He rushed to his motorbike to save his mother and sister, and that was all he had. His house destroyed, his dreams devastated, in our quiet conversation we nevertheless pondered a question that seemed almost unreal: After the tragedy of the tsunami, what, then, is your idea of peace in Aceh? "If we can walk safely in the streets at night… If only I can rebuild our home; to have clean drinking water, and electricity. If I have a job, and my sister has access to education; and, if my mother is healthy…but especially a job, because that will give me respect and dignity."

To realise this dream in Aceh will require new tools in different terrains of struggle – peaceful struggle, but struggle nonetheless. It will require a firm value-base and working against poverty and injustice by empowering people and engaging with social movements, political parties and the media.

As Alejandro Bendana, a former *Sandinista* leader and my co-panelist at a workshop on the peace process in Aceh put it: The aim, in essence, is not really to demobilise but better still to *re*-mobilise people around the core issues that had caused the armed conflict in the first place. To come down from the mountain to the village is not only a physical journey, especially if the "mountain is in your head". Hence comes the need for a change of mindset and mentality – as occurs, for example, when former combatants begin looking at each other not as "enemies" but as "adversaries or antagonists". Returning to the village is "return to peace, to terms of coexistence where the possibility of changing the nature of politics and economy exists".

The peace agreement that was forged in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami has held admirably so far. Now it confronts the harder implementation phase of the process: transforming the armed movement into a vehicle for political participation and designing an inclusive development programme that addresses the needs of the vulnerable sections of society, while providing a balance between the requirements of central government and the demands of the people living in the outlying province of Aceh.

In Kathmandu, Nepal…

Another encounter took place in 2003 in Kathmandu, Nepal with Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, then the ideologue of the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) and leading member of the armed group's negotiating panel.

Bhattarai emphasised that the problem the country faced was primarily political. In his view, the democratic movement of the 1990s had failed the people: The political leadership was inept and corrupt, while the political structures it created were unresponsive to the needs of the rural areas where the majority lived. He spoke of the divisions in society caused by class, caste, clan that were compounded further by discrimination of nationalities, ethnicities, geographical areas, gender, and repressive measures by the central government.

For these reasons, he argued that the Maoist demands in the talks centred mainly on political objectives. To solve deep-seated socio-economic problems and age-old inequalities, he claimed, one needed "to go for the jugular" – that is, to tackle the political questions that had remained unresolved after the inability of the democratic movement and successive parliamentary governments to bring about the social and economic changes required.

Among the issues under discussion, then, were the holding of a National Roundtable Conference which would bring together representatives from the Government, the political

parties (including the Maoists), civil society organisations, representing sectors and nationalities, different ethnicities including the castes (like the "*dalits*" or "untouchables") and women, who generally were under-represented. In turn, this body could constitute an interim government that would then proceed to establish a Constituent Assembly. A package of reforms and constitutional amendments would be studied to pave the way for this sequence of political changes.

2. Raising Questions on Change and Conflict Transformation

Mitchell raises important questions in his comprehensive essay (Mitchell 2005). The veteran conflict analyst, who pioneered in the field of problem-solving workshops, shares his insights into ways of understanding conflict dynamics and practical modes of "resolutionary intervention", providing a framework for thinking about conflict and change while exploring "change processes in protracted conflicts" and highlighting different phases in the "escalation" and "de-escalation" of conflicts.

For the practitioner, a number of questions are posed: How to overcome the obstacles to change? How to break "vicious cycles" of violence and end the "entrapment" that intensifies violent situations, attitudes and behaviours? How to shift gears and change directions to begin addressing the underlying issues that fuel conflict or the unresolved issues that generate further violence? And, importantly, how to sustain and deepen social change, and involve the people in this critical task?

Attempting to respond to these questions, I want to concentrate on the following themes that are related to the efforts of peace practitioners who, in their work to bring about sustainable peace, need to explore ways of advancing processes of social change. Three interrelated themes in dealing with social change in contexts of violent conflict will be tackled:

- Working for Social Change: Exploring Guidelines for Peace Practitioners
- Rethinking Social Change: The Role of Third-Party Facilitation
- Sustaining Social Change: Building Peace Constituencies

2.1 Working for Social Change: Exploring Guidelines for Peace Practitioners

In order to supplement Mitchell's observations on conflict and change with reflections on social change more specifically, it may be helpful to try and provide a framework for those engaged in building peace in conflict situations.[2] In my view, it is critical for peace practitioners who seek ways to transform situations of violent conflict to be guided by principles that can render profound yet peaceful social change possible:

- *Putting the People at the Heart of the Process*: The people who live and suffer through the consequences of violence ultimately deserve to be the architects of the changes required to improve their lives on the ground. Enhancing the capacities of local people in their struggle for peaceful social change is crucial. Thus, putting people at the heart of peace processes is a basic tenet for peace practitioners.[3]

2. This section drew inspiration from "Guiding Principles for Conflict Transformation Work", drafted by a team from International Alert in 1998, soon after the first-ever evaluation of a non-governmental organisation working in the field of conflict resolution (Sørbø et al. 1997); see also the presentation of "Guiding Principles" in the organisation's *Annual Review 2003-4* (International Alert 1998, 2004).

3. An earlier formulation of this insight was a lesson learned in the work of accompanying peace advocates in Colombia, "Meterle pueblo al proceso" – roughly translated as "putting people in the process."

- *Adhering to Human Rights Standards/Traditions and Humanitarian Principles*: The right to life and the respect for others are enshrined in the universal standards of human rights (both civil and political, economic and socio-cultural) and incorporated in diverse cultural traditions. Humanitarian principles are derived from a deep reverence for life. Adhering to these criteria in advancing social change in situations of violence provides an ethical grounding for the often complex task of building peace on different fronts and at the national, regional and global levels.
- *Working in Meaningful Partnerships*: Partnerships are imperative in overcoming obstacles to resolving violent conflicts. Diverse tasks require a diversity of talents and resources, capacities and skills. They also require the ability to supplement, not supplant, the work of others. To complement rather than compete is a critical element in the work of peace practitioners. Social change necessitates not only a change in mind-sets, behaviours and situations but in the ways of doing things and designing alternative futures which involve the next generation, the youth and children. Different sectors of society play a major part in bringing about social change. The role of women in the work for peace has been outstanding, and their strengths must be harnessed. Religious, business and community leaders, and representatives of those in the media and in academia, non-governmental and people's organisations – all have roles to play.
- *Developing Inclusive Processes*: Time and again, experience teaches us how processes of exclusion that humiliate and marginalise people provoke violent reactions. Political and economic processes that permanently alienate significant sectors of society often engender protracted forms of violence. Promoting habits of dialogue, consultative approaches and inclusive processes in the political, economic and cultural spheres is an indispensable ingredient for advancing social change that can address the factors that give rise to systemic violence.
- *Ensuring Sustainability*: If peace is to be sustainable, it must address the root causes of violence, not just its symptoms, and it must create changes not only in personnel but in policies – at local, national, regional and global levels. A just and durable peace demands that we invest energies and resources in building institutions and reforming, or overhauling, inadequate systems, employing appropriate means to ensure that direct violence is not only stopped but its recurrence is prevented in the foreseeable future. If peace is to be sustained, ultimately, it must win the commitment of a new generation. Resolving violent conflict is often the task of generations – there are no quick fixes. The culture of peace and acts of reconciliation cannot remain in the realm of token gestures but must become part of everyday practice.

2.2 Rethinking Social Change: The Role of Third-Party Facilitation

Among the different roles of those engaged in peacebuilding during different phases of conflict (Mitchell 2005, 20), one that is crucial to overcoming obstacles to change is that of enabler or facilitator. Such an enabler or facilitator can help create safe spaces for dialogue, facilitate processes, encourage communication between parties to the conflict, generate ideas and accompany peace advocates and processes, particularly in critical phases of conflict.

Often, it is not a question of either/or (either employing the services of third-party "outsider-neutral" *or* "insider-partial" interveners) but of identifying the combination and complementarity required at different phases of the conflict and at different stages of peacebuilding. The combined efforts of "outsiders" and "insiders", borne by their shared analysis or their different strengths, while cognizant of their own limitations, are important.

Overcoming situations of "entrapment", as described in Mitchell's rigorous essay, is perhaps one area where third-party facilitation can provide most valuable assistance. Generating

creative options, avoiding loss of face, providing alternative venues or fresh approaches, are often best done by those somewhat removed from, yet with the capacity to link up with those intimately involved in, protracted situations of armed conflict. Entrapment is both a state of mind betraying lack of imagination as well as a political reality betraying a lack of will. The task of insiders-partial as well as outsiders-neutral is to combine their collective insights, skills and resources to think and act out of the tried and tired ways "to get to a new place" where it is possible to undertake initiatives that previously could not be conceived of (see also Lederach 2005).

A concrete and recent example is provided by the collaborative efforts in post-tsunami Aceh – involving member states of the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and non-governmental organisations, in particular the Crisis Manangement Initiative led by former Finnish President Martti Athisaari, working hand in hand with the Indonesian government and the forces of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), as well as members of civil society.

The island province of Aceh was devastated by the post-Christmas tsunami of 2004 which took the lives of countless people. This tragedy provided much-needed momentum to a peace process that had earlier seemed to falter and fail. The Memorandum of Agreement of August 2005 was the handiwork of people who faced the twin tragedy of a natural disaster and protracted human-made war, and required the facilitation capacity of international actors who, in a sense, embodied the solidarity of people worldwide, including those in other parts of the country that suffered a shared trauma.

2.3 Sustaining Social Change: Building Peace Constituencies

Formal or informal negotiations and agreements, however, are but moments in peace processes. They are essential, but they do not cover the totality of what can be understood as processes of peace. Even while negotiations stall or fail, there can be efforts to address the unresolved issues that generate, or lead to the escalation of, violent conflict. It is here where *social* change is most critical, where efforts to raise awareness and mobilise people to work for change are essential. The recent peaceful peoples' power experiences in the Philippines and Nepal have shown that it is even more important to engage people in ensuring that change is deepened and not reversed. It is for this reason that one needs to explore the role of peace constituencies in sustaining change – an element that might complement the approaches indicated by Mitchell's paper.

The work of catalysing peace constituencies refers to the process whereby awareness is raised and people are convened and mobilised across sectors and generations in order to put pressure on political leadership, influence policies or provide support for peace-related efforts, giving priority to issues most relevant to advancing a justpeace. In this regard, the role of youth and peace educators needs to be underscored, for the ground-breaking task of building durable peace necessarily must span generations.

Examples of issues that give rise to concerted public campaigns are manifold: Public pressure can be applied to lobby for changes in electoral laws or procedures (for example, changes in electoral systems that espouse "the first past the post" system which spawns a "winner take all" mentality), or for changes in political representation to include hitherto marginalised communities or vulnerable sectors (for example by electing "party list groups" besides the traditional political parties into parliament). The creation of livelihoods for the unemployed or displaced, and the design of socio-economic development strategies that take into account the rural or urban poor, are examples of economic priorities that trade unionists or peasant organisations can work for.

In essence, the building of peace constituencies involves the work of peace advocates, catalysing the further engagement of significant sectors of society in addressing those factors of the violent conflict that can, in the end, help overcome the obstacles to peace.

The parallel work of peace constituencies in exerting pressure to generate alternatives which address issues that negotiations recognise but fail to resolve adequately, is a step on the way to bring about required and relevant social change.

Moreover, it is critical to bring along a new generation of peace advocates who appreciate the galvanising capacity of an alternative vision to break the patterns of past violence. In areas of armed conflict in Africa, Asia, the Americas and the Middle East, it is the youth who often are the principal protagonists on the ground. Their involvement in promoting peaceful alternatives to age-old problems seems critical to ensuring that new mind-sets give rise to less violent ways of behaviour, thus contributing to the building of more peaceful futures.

The people's power experiences in the Philippines that brought down a repressive dictatorship in 1986, and a corrupt regime in 2001, are examples of public pressure which brought about political change. But they also demonstrate that a just and durable peace does not follow automatically: It requires more concerted work and focused reforms, backed up by functioning institutions, resources that are employed for the intended purposes and people with the resolve and professionalism the tasks require.

The social upheavals in 2006 that brought political changes in Thailand and in Nepal demonstrate the peoples' aspiration to reclaim their country from inept or unresponsive leaders, and their capacity to bring about change. But for the changes to be sustained, people's power may need to learn how to transform itself into peace constituencies that are focused on viable issues and able to influence or mount effective vehicles for change. The task requires the involvement of communities and sectors of society who have the capacity to sustain their involvement and their vigilance, and who can be imbued with a sense of common purpose and principles that will help create more inclusive structures in political decision-making and the crafting of economic policies, strategies and programmes.[4]

Social change and conflict resolution are intricately linked, not only in the technical aspects involving professional "conflict interveners", but perhaps more importantly in helping to catalyse or consolidate the sustained engagement of peace constituencies who will advance social change-in-context and who will promote more peaceful ways of resolving differences.

There are no easy answers nor time-tested paths; people confronting a unique set of challenges must time and again learn to move the situation from "theatres of armed conflict" to the realm of negotiating possibilities. It is here that Mitchell's advice is valuable, "to distinguish those factors which are tractable… and those which are inherently intractable" (Mitchell 2005, 21). The task is to change what is changeable, given limited resources and capacities, with a sense of realism; and to recognise that what is intractable in the course of time can be addressed under a new set of circumstances or with a new cast of characters.

An example of a tractable factor which can be addressed, *if* the will and the imagination exist, is a deteriorating human rights situation which often results in obstacles to peace negotiations. Human rights violations are tractable factors since there are proven ways in which they can be addressed. The intensifying political killings in the course of 2005 and the first half of 2006 in the Philippines provide a case in point. The deterioration in the human rights situation has undermined trust between the parties in conflict and derailed the peace negotiations. Putting pressure on the political leadership to give priority to stopping the killings, addressing the climate of impunity,

4. A recent debate on the strengths and limitations of people's power took place on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of people's power in the Philippines. Randy David, an insightful sociologist from the University of the Philippines, has been a proponent of retrieving the values of people's power and recognising its capacity to bring about change (see his regular Sunday columns in the Philippine Daily Inquirer prior to the people power commemoration in February 2006).

protecting witnesses, ensuring that investigations lead to convictions and identifying mechanisms, both internally and internationally, to boost efforts to improve human rights are some of the measures that now need to be undertaken if trust is to be restored and the formal peace talks are to be resumed.

Box 2: Efforts to Address Tractable Factors in Relation to Peace Processes

A relevant illustration of efforts to address a tractable factor in a conflict situation is the experience in the Philippines regarding the work to put a stop to political killings. Human rights groups and peace advocates have documented and denounced increasing human rights violations in the country that have escalated even before the breakdown of peace talks between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the National Democratic Front (NDF) which had been suspended since August 2004 – despite a Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL), signed by the conflict parties in 1998.

Ending political killings, taking place in an apparent "climate of impunity", had become an imperative – if conditions more conducive to exploring possible talks were to be created. It was clear from consultations with the parties to the conflict and the official facilitators that peace talks could not be resumed under the current conditions.

It was this focus which guided International Alert's (IA) peace missions to the Philippines in 2006, resulting in greater collaboration with human rights organisations and helping to synergise work of peace and human rights advocates. In particular, IA cooperated closely with the Amnesty International team working on the Philippines as well as local human rights groups who had been monitoring compliance with the human rights agreement and the events on the ground.

Amnesty launched a report on 15 August 2006 entitled "Philippines: Political Killings, Human Rights and the Peace Process" with a set of recommendations urging immediate respect for human rights, effective investigations and witness protection, compliance with the human rights agreement and the operation of the joint monitoring committee, and calling for the strengthening of local institutions as well as availing of UN expertise such as the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions. The report has received wide coverage and elicited diverse responses; in particular, the NDF has expressed willingness to resume "peace negotiations directed at addressing the social roots of the armed conflict"[5] while the Government condemned the political killings in the "harshest possible terms" on the eve of the 23rd anniversary of the assassination of the late Senator Benigno Aquino on 21 August.

3. A Long-Term Perspective for Multi-Dimensional Change

Moving a situation that is entrenched in the dynamics of escalation and may lead to entrapment requires perspective, and bringing about social change will definitely require a long-term perspective. The previous reflections have tried to respond to the question not only of how to overcome obstacles to change, but of how to help bring about the kind of profound social change required to address the underlying factors of violent conflict and to prevent its recurrence or intensification – from the perspective of reflective, principled peace practice.

5. Philippine Daily Inquirer, 17 August 2006.

Mitchell observes in his concluding section that "our present state of knowledge about the relationship between change, conflict and conflict resolution is that it offers little in the way of practical guidance to anyone seeking to initiate or reinforce resolutionary change processes" (Mitchell 2005, 21). I have therefore focused my response on a discussion of issues that would help the reflective peace practitioner navigate a way to better understanding the intricate and necessary relationship of social change and the pursuit of justpeace – a more peaceful place that will be more just and durable, where people are able to settle differences in less conflictive and nonviolent ways.

In a number of violent conflicts that I have closely observed or worked in, it has been made abundantly clear that conflict resolution practices in the end must result in profound changes in attitudes, behaviour or in situations and structures that touch the following four areas: respect for human rights including diverse identities, inclusive governance, sustainable development and the reform of the security sector.

Tackled together, they will have a profound impact. Paying attention to these issues can significantly contribute to the resolution of violent conflicts and foster social change leading to a more just and peaceful society.[6]

- *Protecting Human Rights*: Among the first casualties of war are respect for human rights and the protection of vulnerable civilian populations. The bitterness of violent conflict is often spawned by atrocious behaviour not only in the field of battle but spilling over into the communities. It is imperative to adhere to human rights traditions and norms as well as international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles.
- *Promoting Inclusive Governance*: At the core of most conflicts is the struggle for political power. The exclusive character of some so-called "democracies" often violates the people's right to participate in governance, ignoring the role of minorities or vulnerable sectors of society. Electoral, political and constitutional reforms can have far-reaching implications that directly influence the direction of conflicts and can move political systems to a state where differences can be resolved without the resort to arms.
- *Catalysing Sustainable Development*: A common cry of people who are categorised among the rural and urban poor is for adequate health and housing, clean drinking water, electricity for their homes, roads to transport their goods to market, education for their children, social security for their old age, and meaningful livelihoods in dignified communities: this is what peace ultimately means to the people on the streets or in the villages. Strategies for economic development designed to eradicate or reduce poverty must find a way to relate to this.
- *Advancing Security Sector Reform*: Conflict tends to escalate precisely in those situations where abuses by the military and police heighten tensions or lead to violations of basic rights. It is even worse when the public forces are manipulated or used to perpetuate the repressive use of political power by corrupt leaders. Ensuring civilian supremacy and oversight over the military and adherence to accepted codes of conduct is of great importance here. It is for this reason that security sector reform can no longer be left to experts alone; peace practitioners, peace advocates and peace constituencies need to be more deeply involved in what perhaps can be called the hard inner core that requires serious change in the work to resolve armed conflicts.

The work for peace in the end is the work of many hands, encompassing the engagement of different people, organisations and even generations. It has different phases, and different levels

6. *Searching for Peace in Asia Pacific: An Overview of Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities* (2004) includes a number of essays that deal with these critical themes. See in particular Garcia 2004.

(local, national, regional and global). Social change is ultimately the people's prerogative and their continuing challenge – though at times their efforts may require support and the sustained involvement of others. In accompanying peace advocates and the processes they construct, peace practitioners have a modest and limited task – helping to create spaces or facilitate communication to catalyse new initiatives or influence policies; helping to shape the thinking or the acting that eventually could result in diverse changes or profound social change. In the end, such collective efforts help address the issues that give rise to violent conflicts and ultimately transform them into either opportunities or "cornerstones" of more peaceful outcomes.

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See also...

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- Ed Garcia, *Addressing Social Change in Situations of Violent Conflict: A Practitioner's Perspective*
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