

CONFLICT, LEARNING AND SUSTAINABLE PEACEBUILDING: CASE STUDIES FOR FINDING A BETTER WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

There is much to know about conflict and how to survive its pressures and threats, both real and imagined, and how we can find a better way forward. There is much here to teach others. Sparked by my Fulbright Awards to Northern Ireland, Burundi (East Africa) and South Korea, I could see both the challenges and rich promises of a commitment to sustainable peacebuilding, that is, the interconnected health of people, their economies, and the environment.

Keywords: peacebuilding • sustainability • learning



There is much to know about conflict and how to survive its pressures and threats, both real and imagined, and most importantly, how we can find a better way forward. There is much to study, much to practice and much to teach others. What we must all learn about dealing with conflict is also what all of us can—and should—do differently. Too often we only think of conflict in interpersonal, regional, national and/or international contexts. However, in my work, I follow the traditional definitions of “sustainability,” the interconnected health of people, their economies, and the environment.

For example, there is much to know about the research on cooperation, what is required to build effective teamwork, and foster the mutual interdependence that keeps team members engaged and invested in finding solutions that work for everyone and that also work for the health of the environment. What educators understand about learning can be shared widely.

There is also much to know about our social-emotional makeup, especially when conflicts erupt into violence. There is the critical and creative thinking that defines how we approach these conflicts and how we find innovative ways forward, how we can see through to new possibilities. We can also study the values that underlie conflicts at a deeper level, the moral development that often impacts how people of different ages and backgrounds will respond.

My three international experiences with Fulbright pushed me past traditional academically based theories about conflict and directly into diverse communities that had been consumed by struggles to move past hatreds and prejudices, threats, and violence. I saw first-hand how different people and cultures responded to conflicts, how they were able to explore

new ways forward as they moved toward sustainable peacebuilding. I could see how they had shifted from the theoretical to the real, from one perspective to an appreciation for the value of different perspectives, from a strictly human impact to inclusion of environmental implications as well.

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Case studies are commonly used in professional schools of business and law, while engineering curricula will often have an upper division focus on collaborative projects as students prepare to transition to the work world. In a parallel fashion, a few medical schools have also shifted to problem-based learning. All these efforts are a reflection of the desire by faculty to better challenge students with more accurate representation of the complexities of these fields, content that defied simplistic, dichotomous answers of right or wrong, true or false. My three Fulbright awards allowed me to resist the academic pressure for reductionist assessments and thinking about definitive answers only about human conditions, and, instead, look for larger connections and insights.

All of these insights into practical examples have also come together in a forthcoming book by the same title as this article, *Conflict, Learning and Sustainable Peacebuilding: Case Studies for Finding a Better Way Forward*.

NORTHERN IRELAND

On my own journey of discovery, I was fortunate to have been awarded a Fulbright Specialist Award in 2006 for a six-week experience in Northern Ireland with community members from across that horrific 800-year divide that the British empire had imposed on the native population. Defying all those who insisted that a peace accord was forever doomed by the scars of the supposedly intractable nature of this history, peace activists from both sides of the Protestant / Catholic divide, primarily women at first, began pressing for a new, united way forward out of the daily cauldron of violence. Eventually, even the paramilitary soldiers on both sides joined the effort that produced the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. They eliminated all guns from the streets where deadly retaliatory reprisals had created a climate of fear, anger, and despair.

Everyone could ask what is the price security and who provides it? Who can be trusted? As the descendents of the colonial power, British soldiers were usually aligned with the Protestant loyalists. The British military compounds were large and formidable, whether in Belfast or elsewhere, a constant reminder of power.

A focus on sustainable peacebuilding meant reinvesting the money once used for weapons into collaborative grassroots projects that could be tried and developed as constructive and inclusive ways forward. These efforts built on the talents, commitment and imaginations of the citizens suddenly freed from the fears of the past. Victims and former prisoners met on weekends to better understand each other. Teachers joined the challenge of developing new perspectives on history in the newly created integrated schools that would shift understanding away from blaming to a more honest, nuanced understanding of a complex and violent history.

BURUNDI

For my 2011 Fulbright Specialist award on sustainable peacebuilding at the University of Ngozi in Burundi, East Africa, I worked with young people who could see real value in forging teams across tribal lines that had exploded into a long and bloody civil war after the German and Belgian colonists left in 1962 and gave way to a newly independent nation. Our focus on education allowed a reexamination of conflicts sparked by the colonial overlords motivated primarily by exploitation, profit, and power, sparking conflicts that persisted after the overlords left.

When Nelson Mandela arrived in the late 1990s to mediate a peace process, he brought with him his hard-earned experiences as a rebel leader, a prisoner, and later as the elected leader of South Africa. South Africa had just emerged peacefully from the state-sanctioned oppression of apartheid, where the minority white population held power over the majority black population. While academics formulated and debated various theories about the way forward in Burundi, Mandela argued from first-hand experiences how tribal animosities could be replaced with shared perspectives and teamwork, which he helped to implement.

Beyond this change and something that few in the global north could imagine, Mandela also pushed for the full integration of women into every agency of government, including the police and military. The validity of this recommendation proved itself as the civil war ended, as former combatants put down their weapons and joined with citizens on both sides to create a sustainable and peaceful way forward. The incorporation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa was headed by Bishop Tutu. His gift to everyone was his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*.

Another academic and theoretical understanding of these historical events can be found in the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, who described a theory of moral development. Using this model, teachers could reference a hierarchy of thinking and values that moved from obedience at the lowest level to universal ethical principles at the highest level. As a variation of this work, one of his colleagues, Carol Gilligan, then published her analysis, *In a Different Voice*, and described how the responses of females were often quite different

to what makes offered, emphasizing the centrality of relationships to their thinking about moral dilemmas. As an example, surviving 27 years in prison in South Africa seemed to give Mandela the time and space to see new ways through entrenched conflicts in his own nation and then offer new insights for the peace process in Burundi.

Importantly, I was also able to go beyond the time and resource limitations of that one Fulbright Specialist Award and work with the Rotary Foundation's Global Grants Program to build and expand our work in Burundi. In truth, I have found that it is important for developing our Global Grant to have had that six-week experience with the Fulbright Award and be able to build relationships on the ground. In this way these two international awards for sustainable peacebuilding serve as near perfect companion efforts.

Back home in US I wanted to build on the good will from our focus on peacebuilding. Our Rotary Club in Fort Collins, Colorado, offered numerous examples of successful overseas projects. In time, I developed a proposal for a Global Grant. A Rotary Club in Ngozi, Burundi was formed that embraced our commitment to "service in action" in order to help a poor mountain community improve their water system and health.

SOUTH KOREA

In Spring 2014 I was also fortunate to have been awarded a Fulbright Scholar's Award to teach a course in peacemaking in South Korea at the Graduate Institute of Peace (GIP) Studies, a campus of Kyung Hee University. It is interesting that at a time when headlines in the US were ablaze with reports about the threat from North Korea as it tested its missiles, many of our students—some of whom were active-duty South Korean army officers—wanted to discuss what had happened in Germany to promote reunification after the Berlin Wall had come down.

The Graduate Institute of Peace Studies was established in 1984 by a philanthropist who fled the North and wanted to educate future leaders with a new vision. In 1993 GIP was awarded the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education for its contribution to international peace efforts. All classes are in English and many of the students receive scholarships.

There is much in this history to inspire sustainable peacebuilding everywhere. Korea was devastated by the war in the 1950s and much of the South lay in ruins. Yet the people of South Korea sparked an economic recovery that proved to be the fastest rise out of poverty that the world would see in the twentieth century. Notably, education was at the center of this turnaround as technological advances were married with talent.

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

Central to my thesis here is that educators, in particular, can play a key role in understanding and sharing positive examples of sustainable peacebuilding, unpacking the dynamics that allowed people to emerge out of conflict and violence with new and hopeful ideas. As Elise Boulding described in her groundbreaking book, *Cultures of Peace*, the media in most nations has always focused overwhelmingly on conflict and violence. As the old newspaper truism goes, “if it bleeds, it leads.” As a sociologist and a Quaker, Boulding was pointedly critical of the fields of journalism, history, political science, and other academic fields that neglected the study of peaceful change, a topic rich with complexities needing to be untangled and then taught, studied and practiced.

CASE STUDIES OF SUSTAINABLE PEACEBUILDING

In this work, I also embraced the cognitive development challenges that William Perry noted for his studies of the college years. When I heard the range of ideas that emerged from different experiences and perspectives on conflict in other cultures, I could open up to the varying shades of gray in these cases. As Perry noted, I could begin to see the multiplicity of perspectives that were possible. Bringing this broader perspective to life and sorting through a range of responses required me to step back, reflect and analyze, what psychologists refer to as metacognition or thinking about thinking, which I described in my 1999 book, *Metateaching and the Instructional Map*.

Hmelo-Silver and Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen have described their use of case studies. I knew from my own experiences that such work allowed for the application of Bloom’s taxonomy in the cognitive domain where students would have the chance to apply their knowledge with real world examples, to deepen their understanding through analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Educators could also pick up the developmentalist mantle championed by researchers such as Kohlberg, who has argued for the use of dilemmas where conflicts would engage students in deeper discussions about underlying moral choices.

In my own work with Sue Doe, we pushed for greater engagement in the classroom, the development of problem-solving abilities, and an appreciation for the benefits of engagement, discovery, and relevance that come with problem- and case-based learning. In two books of case studies, Kaye Holman and I featured the work of students in my classes that illustrate these dynamics in diverse disciplinary settings.

In all this work, we emphasized models for consensus and processes for resolving issues that often arise in groups when they do not devolve into either aggressive or submissive responses. For example, knowing how to ascribe the roles of Transactional Analysis—the Parent, Adult, and Child ego states—offers people of all ages an accessible and effective framework for analyzing past interactions and planning for the future.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Sparked by my Fulbright Specialist Award to Northern Ireland, I could see how the shift of funding from weaponry to support of grassroots peacebuilding proved to be decisive in reframing a core tenant that defines many nations, i.e., that they must have a collective commitment to defending tier borders, themselves and the health of their lands. The growth of integrated schools, for example, opens the door to rethink traditional school curricula and include topics too often neglected, topics that will require an inclusive perspective of voices historically segregated. The door for addressing deeper historical and environmental issues will now open a bit more.

The small start-up business T.R.E.E.—Timber Recycling Eco Enterprises—was inspired by two carpenters who wanted to promote green jobs and skills that could equip the youth with new employment potential. So many of the young men, in particular, had been easy recruits for the partner. They wanted to confront the wasteful practice of sending so much of the wood from construction sites to the land-fill, i.e., making peace with paramilitaries because they were uneducated and unemployable. And most importantly, the managers of T.R.E.E. insisted that Catholic and Protestant youth work side by side, what we know from Allport's work, is the most powerful way to deconstruct prejudice and build teamwork.

Years later, David and Roger Johnson studied the dynamics of teamwork in education, what promoted cooperation, how learning could deepen and creativity flourish from positive interdependence. The value for me from Fulbright is that it allowed me to walk the streets in Northern Ireland, South Korea and Burundi, each with their own rich histories of conflicts and creative, healthy, more sustainable responses.

Finally, these kinds of experiences that were funded by Fulbright provided me with many examples of inspired change. It was in Northern Ireland that I was fortunate to meet with Mairead Maguire who was honored with the 1976 Nobel Peace Prize for leading others, primarily women, in facing angry mobs protecting the “sanctity” of their ethnic neighborhoods. When I asked her how she herself remained inspired, she showed me a wall that was adorned with photographs of these activists who were out on the streets, week after week, promoting peace and turning centuries of conflict and violence upside down and inside out.

NOTES

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr William M. Timpson is a retired professor in the School of Education at Colorado State University. Along with numerous articles, chapters and grants, he has written or co-authored nineteen books including several that address issues of peace and reconciliation, sustainability and diversity. In 2006, he served as a Fulbright Specialist in peace and reconciliation studies at the University of Ulster's UNESCO Centre in Northern Ireland, and again in 2011 at the University of Ngozi in Burundi, East Africa, where he continues to work with Rotary International Global Grants to infuse sustainable peace studies into the academic programs of the University of Ngozi, the area schools, and church communities. In Spring 2014, he served as a Fulbright Teaching Scholar at Kyung Hee's Graduate Institute of Peace Studies in South Korea.
