

# Peacebuilding in conflict zones demands people-centric approach

March 19 2018, by Kevin Casey, From Horizon Magazine

---



The end of a conflict such as World War I marks only the beginning of a restoration period. Credit: Fernand Cuville, public domain

The challenge of how to rebuild society following conflict is a difficult

question that arises all too frequently, but recent studies have demonstrated that putting people at the centre of the process and enabling cooperation on politically neutral issues can help build peace.

When the entire social fabric has been torn up and everything from electricity supply to education has been badly damaged, the key question is, when it comes to rebuilding a broken society, where does one start?

"Unless you deal with the transformation of the conflict effectively, it's likely to come back to you and lead to the resumption of the conflict," said Alpaslan Ozerdem, professor of peacebuilding at Coventry University in the UK.

Prof. Ozerdem has over 20 years of experience in peacebuilding worldwide in diverse conflict zones such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, El Salvador, Liberia, Kosovo, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. He was also the scientific coordinator of a project called ICELCT which looked at the role of leadership in conflict transformations, in order to share lessons and develop networks of expertise for future efforts.

He says the same rule applies everywhere – that unless you get to the root causes of a conflict, 'then what you do in the name of peacebuilding becomes really ad hoc and short-termist."

We must not forget who conflict transformation is for. "We need to put human beings, communities, in the centre of what we do," said Prof. Ozerdem. "What I would call a human-security-centred peacebuilding."

There is a simple test for this – ask a politician watching TV coverage of bombed-out buildings with a few people moving amongst the rubble what they see.

"I think most of them will say "the destruction of buildings,"" said Prof.

Ozerdem. "But unless they see those few people amongst the rubble and ask what kind of life they have, their aspirations, their needs ... then you are not putting people and communities in the centre of that process."

And the process can be a long one, as a ceasefire marks just the beginning of the end of conflict. "The signing of a peace agreement ... is only the indication of a negative peace ... the absence of violence," he said.

## Home

When the violence ends, it doesn't mean displaced people can immediately return home as the consequences of conflict are likely to play out for years to come.

In the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, for example, thousands of child soldiers who were coerced into fighting, committing atrocities in the name of their leadership, could not return home after the conflicts because they were rejected by their own families and villages. "There is no real home for these [child soldiers](#)," said Prof. Ozerdem.

Even when there is a welcome, the fabric of the home location is often destroyed, with everything from water and electricity to education, health and employment in crisis. "Home can be a very tough place," he said.

Yet home has almost irresistible appeal, especially for those forcibly evicted from it. For example, following World War I, people began returning to their destroyed homes even before the armistice was signed in 1918.

Dr. Pierre Purseigle from the University of Warwick, UK, says the experience of exile is that you immediately start thinking of your return,

even though the place is devastated.

As an associate professor of modern continental European history, he researched the reconstruction of Belgium and northern France in the interwar years as part of the Urban Recovery 14-39 project. That region saw much of the most intense fighting in World War I.

Planning for post-war reconstruction began as early as 1914 and involved international experts such as George Ford from the USA who often urged radical reinvention of the urban environment. Tensions arose between those who saw reconstruction as a restorative process and those who saw it as an opportunity to modernise urban living.

Describing the conservative instincts of locals immediately following the Great War, Prof. Purseigle said, "They want to return to status quo *ante bellum*, literally, to the way life was before the war."

## **Communities**

He said that communities of the devastated regions felt neglected by the national authorities, because 'their specific experience, their specific sacrifice, the fact that they did not only lose men and served militarily but also have to rebuild their homes and their towns, that this defining aspect of their experience (was) being forgotten."

Despite the destruction, economic recovery was remarkably strong, with industrial output in Belgium and France returning to pre-war levels by 1926. Community recovery was slower but it was assisted by informal solidarity networks and international fundraising. During the interwar years, in deference to the enormous sacrifices of the population, the principles of universal suffrage began to be adopted more widely, which amounted to a *quid pro quo* of sorts for the patriotic annihilation of a generation.

Fast-forward to the present day and the need for peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Europe and beyond is as great as ever. Mihail Dimovski, executive director of the Regional Environmental Centre (REC) based in Budapest, Hungary, says that one way to actively promote peace is to focus on a politically neutral issue such as the environment. Donors such as the EU and others support peace building through the environmental projects promoted by the REC.

Building on experience acquired in the Balkans, the REC helps devise programmes that benefit all parties concerned. In January 2018, the REC began a new mission to support renewables and energy efficiency in Ukraine, where conflict is ongoing.

"In those situations where there is an open conflict ... the main issue is to put the main stakeholders at the same table," said Dimovski, to discuss 'something which is not part of the [conflict](#) agenda.'

He says the REC framework helps to strengthen the economy but also grows the regional institutions. It creates a 'stability platform' that donor countries can have confidence in and effects real change.

"The programme itself has to have a spillover effect on issues which are not the primary objective for the programme," he said. But, he says, for sustainable peace, it's essential that the process creates 'an impact on the daily lives of the people.'

Provided by Horizon: The EU Research & Innovation Magazine

Citation: Peacebuilding in conflict zones demands people-centric approach (2018, March 19) retrieved 5 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-03-peacebuilding-conflict-zones-demands-people-centric.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.