

IN DEPTH

Inside mediators: dialogue from the heart of conflict

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Conflict, whether violent or not, shrinks the space for open and honest conversations. In Northern Ireland there was a song entitled 'Whatever you say, say nothing', a sentiment that summed up local fears. In contested societies it is all about who has the last word or can make the quickest (and often most cutting) reply, rather than listening to what someone from 'the other' side is saying. Everything is reduced to 'winners' and 'losers'; 'them' and 'us'. Yet in Northern Ireland (or the North of Ireland or even 'the occupied 6 counties': we can't even agree the name) violent conflict wrecked havoc and shattered lives, only to end 30 years later around the negotiation table. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement offers a framework for peaceful progression, although the peace process itself remains fragile.

The process of arriving at inclusive negotiations was hard won. There was international prodding, encouragement and celebration of steps taken, but at the end of the day it took internal steps to build relationships and to sound out the options available. This was rarely achieved through the work of external mediators, but more through the role of local interlocutors – individuals often termed 'insider-outsiders': people who had credibility within their own community/constituency, but who recognised that stuck political stand-off needed the oxygen of external critique and ideas. As one such 'insider-outsider' argued 'Old problems need new questions asked of them'.

The 'insider-outsider' activist is ideally steeped in the positions and nuances of 'their own side', but maintains a number of trusted external contacts that bridge to others who hold different views and perspectives. They can then engage in a process that

allows the flow of different viewpoints for consideration over a period of time, translating the information shared into terms that are understandable to the groups involved. Critical questions can be framed and posed in challenge to established group narratives. These challenges need to take account of what is achievable at any particular time or context. This interlocuter approach is more effective than bringing people of opposing political viewpoints together in what often turns out to be defensive and antagonistic confrontation. Instead, the 'insider-outsider' individual is well-placed to take the temperature of reactions to critical questions and propositions, using this to assess the pace of possible dialogue.

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Clarifying positions

The other important role that local interlocuters can play is that of helping a political constituency to articulate its political position in clearer terms so that it can better communicate it to others. In times of conflict there is a danger that aligned activists, on either side of the divide, deem those who are critical of their position as being either mad or bad, instead of engaging with opposing views. A skilled interlocuter, who has credibility, patience and maintains a low public profile, can probe the unclear or weak points of arguments in order to help clarification for both internal and external audiences. S/he can pose the questions that worry those on 'the other side' of the argument. This can help avoid increased antagonism as a result of misunderstanding and/or misinterpretation (deliberate or otherwise). While many allegiances in a politically contested society tend to be rooted in emotion, other issues can benefit by a harder edged focus on economic and social realities. What is the nature of the society that we are trying to achieve? What will be the economic implications of constitutional change? What will be the impact on different sections of society –farmers; businesspeople; factory workers; pensioners, etc?

Examining the range of hopes and concerns held by ‘the anxious middle’ segment of the local population can also help in clarifying options, opportunities and challenges. There will always be that segment of the population that is strongly supportive of a particular position; then there is a second segment that hold equally strong oppositional views; but numerous public attitude studies suggest that there is up to 60% of the population that are unsure of their position, or that swing in opinion depending on prevailing circumstances. What are the questions and concerns of this ‘anxious middle’, and how can these be engaged with rather than lectured or harassed? This is something that local civil society leaders are in a good position to explore and discuss with those who hold more entrenched political allegiances.

“ Where political division silences people it is important to seek out ways of giving back voice to those that are marginalised through conflict ”

One community-based approach adopted in Northern Ireland involved working with a number of ‘single identity’ communities – either Nationalist/Republican or Loyalist/Unionist in composition. Then, after good working relationships had been established, bringing together the various communities in a joint conference where they listened to, and questioned, a panel of external experts. The opposing communities did not directly question or confront each other, but they heard the questions posed by representatives of ‘the other’ community to the external experts thereby getting insight into their concerns and perspectives, in addition to hearing the experts’ replies. Over time, the community representatives grew the confidence to engage directly on sensitive issues.

Creating space for new suggestions and ideas

Where political division silences people it is important to seek out ways of giving back voice to those that are marginalised through conflict. This can be at the level of community engagement around shared common concerns (economic and social

issues) rather than more divisive political questions. Women's groups are often the first to build such relationships. However, more largescale and ambitious initiatives are also possible. When Northern Ireland was experiencing a period of acute political stalemate, the civil society directed Opsahl Commission was established. Funded by independent philanthropy, an international panel (under the chairperson of Norwegian Professor Opsahl) was brought together to invite submissions from any group, organisation or individual across the North that wanted to have a say in the future of the region. Representations (both written and in person) were received from people who were victims/survivors of violence; political parties; church representatives; paramilitary organisations; sporting groups; business; trade unions and the community and voluntary sectors, amongst others. Commission hearings were held in villages and towns, with a report bringing together the various views for consideration. This process allowed equal weight to all views and facilitated an exchange of information.

A more recent model of consultation, implemented well in the Republic of Ireland, is the Citizen Assembly approach where a group of randomly selected citizens engage in facilitated discussion on a difficult political issue. A range of participative democracy strategies have now been road tested in various parts of the world and can be adapted to create space for discussion and dialogue in divided societies. The main objective is to re-introduce an element of complexity into what are often zero-sum game situations. The 'winner' and 'loser' syndrome invariably ratchets up tension.

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Creating space for discussion is an even greater challenge when seeking to engage with interested parties that are outside the immediacy of the disputed political region. Views and opinions in both Britain and the Republic of Ireland were important for decisions to be taken within, and about, Northern Ireland. The independent civil society initiative, the British-Irish Association, organised meetings over many years, as did other

organisations. The reality is, that although often uncomfortable, views in the hinterland country(ies) cannot be ignored. As Nelson Mandela often repeated – ‘If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy, then he becomes your partner’. This is certainly not easy, particularly when there is a power imbalance during the heat of conflict, but an important insight to keep in mind over the long-term.

Are there potential areas of compromise?

The word ‘compromise’ itself can set teeth on edge in a situation of deep political division, but the reality remains that society is heterogeneous in nature and different perspectives need to be factored into any agreed settlement as to how people can live together. There are a range of smart options that facilitate compromise. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, for example, provides for dual citizenship and national identity. People can have a British or an Irish passport, or both (a political agreement that is currently being destabilised by a potential Brexit). Provision was made for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, complemented by a Charter of Rights for the island of Ireland, all within the framing of the European Convention on Human Rights. North-South (within the island of Ireland) and East-West (between the islands of Ireland and Britain) institutions and arrangements were put in place. In short, every effort was made to provide for mix and match identity, possibilities of cross-border(s) cooperation and the blunting of divisions. Strong devolved structures (sadly currently inoperative) offered a political structure for relations within, and between, communities in Northern Ireland. While the peace agreement implementation process has been dogged with difficulties, the reality remains that when opposing parties came together there was a shared recognition of the need for both compromise and creative thinking.

A final thought –it is never too early to design and identify strategies and approaches to promote greater understanding from the heart of conflict. These will rarely offer short-term fixes, but may help to create a process to avoid the violence which filled the political vacuum that bedevilled Northern Ireland (the North of Ireland) over so many decades.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Avila Kilmurray currently works with The Social Change Initiative, an international NGO

working to strengthen civil society activism and advocacy in the areas of human rights, peacebuilding and refugee/migrant rights. She has worked in Northern Ireland since 1975. She was a member of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition negotiation team for the Good Friday Agreement, and as Director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (1994-2014) managed EU PEACE funding for the re-integration of political ex-prisoners and victims/survivors of violence. Avila is a Board member of the International Fund for Ireland and a number of independent philanthropies.

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