

Dear Reader

This newsletter contains a report of our recent seminar on 'The Ethics of Post War Intervention'. We hope you enjoy it.

The Ethics of Post War Intervention – dilemmas of conflict transformation practice

Report of a seminar held on 6th October 2003 at Islington Town Hall, Upper Street

Introduction

In recent years (I)NGOS have repeatedly been drawn into post-war situations in which their work was funded by the very governments that launched the war - albeit ostensibly in response to conflict or repression. This presents the NGO community with a dilemma: if they take the money, how far is their independence compromised, and with what justification can they be described as condoning the war? The Committee for Conflict Transformation Support (CCTS) organised this seminar to allow practitioners to share their experience and discuss possible ways of working within the dilemma. It was attended by 17 people and chaired by Diana Francis and Michael Randle. The seminar began with informal presentations (summarised below) from each of three panellists: Roberta Bacic from War Resisters International (WRI), Andy Carl from Conciliation Resources (CR) and Nana Busia from International Alert (IA).

Roberta Bacic

Roberta explained that WRI exists to promote nonviolent action against the causes of war, and to support and connect people around the world who refuse to take part in war or in preparations for war. It was founded in 1921 (with the name Paco) based on the declaration that: "*War is a crime against humanity. I am therefore determined not to support any kind of war, and to strive for the removal of all causes of war.*"

It believes that even wars described as humanitarian military interventions (however 'good' the cause may seem) always serve political or economic interests, and always lead to suffering and destruction. It observes that, very often, the governments that involve themselves in war (whether politically, militarily, or economically) subsequently engage in setting up mechanisms to 'repair' what they have first destroyed, and that NGOs risk being caught up in this longer term war agenda and becoming accomplices if they accept government funding¹. From this perspective, WRI consider that 'post war intervention' is in itself ethically unacceptable. Thus the range of activities that WRI undertakes is necessarily limited, but it is correspondingly less susceptible to the particular dilemmas under discussion in the seminar.

¹ Roberta has subsequently clarified the fact that WRI has at times received government support, but only for projects that it has designed and developed internally.

WRI consists of a network of autonomous organisations, working at a grassroots level in many countries around the world, which are united under the declaration given above. Its policies and activities, which are decided by debate in a triennial conference, include political campaigning for nonviolent action, support of conscientious objectors (in a growing number of countries), and evaluating and learning from different experiences of dealing with war or dictatorship. It aims to support an alternative discourse, especially in countries where the political regime seems to offer no alternative, and to open up the possibility of new ways of acting in the future.

Andy Carl

Andy Carl said he was somewhat envious of organisations like WRI who had such a clear-cut view. CR did intervene in war-torn areas with conflict resolution work in an attempt to change things for the better and, because it was a small organisation, it accepted funding from DFID and intergovernmental bodies.

The particular problem we were discussing was perhaps related to the discomfort of working in asymmetric collaboration with awkward partners, whether governments or funding agencies with a different or contradictory set of ethics or policies. Should practitioners accept money from corporations or governments? The contradictions were evident, but could we live with them?

He then gave examples of the kinds of problems and issues that arose:

- USAID recently put a contract out to tender for 'managing African conflict'. The language of the contract was informed by the discourse of conflict resolution, but the work itself was framed as a business transaction. The contract was taken up by American construction firms (to handle the physical reconstruction) who in turn approached CR and other NGOs to act as 'subcontractors' to handle the peace-building aspects of the work. In this instance CR decided against co-operating. However, sometimes there is a case for going in with one's eyes open to the pitfalls.
- The Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance (part of USAID) describes NGOs as 'Private and Voluntary Organisations' (PVOs)² - indicating that they regard NGOs as special-interest groups. From the US government perspective the 'PVOs' are contracted to implement US policy.
- Similarly the UK government's 'Global Conflict Prevention Pool' see NGOs as complementing British government policies. The pool – a joint UK Foreign Office/MOD/DFID initiative that aims 'to reduce the number of people affected by violent conflict' recently held a meeting to launch a report³ about its work. But it made virtually no effort to publicise the launch, inviting neither MPs nor the press. There was no mention during the meeting of the wars in Afghanistan or Iraq, and one of the speakers, in answer to a question, said he saw no contradiction between the aim of preventing conflict and the British government's promotion of arms exports.
- A number of conflict transformation practitioners (including Andy) recently received an email from someone working for a UK agency who had gone to Iraq to promote the development of civil society. In the course of asking for suitable Iraqi contacts, he suggested that, given the area of Iraq and the size of its population, it should be able to support at least 70,000 NGOs. This mechanistic, and top-down approach was incompatible with the notion that the request for help should come from below, from local groups and partners.

² See their recent report 'USAID-PVO Dialogue on Working in Conflict' at http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/private_voluntary_cooperation/conflict_forum032703.pdf

³ The report is available at http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Pubs/files/global_conflict_prevention_pool.pdf (note that the word 'global' really is misspelled in the file name)

- NGOs that work with 'opposition' groups in areas of conflict risk losing any future funding. In addition (although it has not been applied in this way to date) the UK Prevention of Terrorism Act leaves NGOs open to prosecution if they work with 'terrorist' opposition groups, even when their work is of a peace-building nature.

In this climate, NGOs need to tread carefully if they are to maintain their integrity and their independence. Important issues include:

- Being uncompromising about who we are and what we stand for (defending the 'N' in 'NGO'), remembering that we work for justice, not for profit.
- Engaging in a dialogue on prevention with our home governments and governmental partners before they launch (or support) future wars.
- Being clear about our role when working with partner organisations post-conflict to support 'popular sovereignty' and rebuild civil society.

These issues are particularly challenging when we depend on government funding.

Nana Busia

Nana gave an African perspective on the causes and impact of conflict, and on the dilemmas this presents to NGOs.

In his view the world continues to be divided into the politically and economically powerful North and the relatively undeveloped and powerless South. While this continues to be the case, conflicts and human rights violations in the South are inevitably related to the ambitions and interests of the North. The foreign policy of any country is informed by national interest (Robin Cook's attempts at an ethical foreign policy notwithstanding). It follows that, if a Southern country contains resources that are of interest to the North, it is likely to be destabilised by the more powerful country as a means of accessing those resources. This was the case, for example, when uranium was discovered in Nigeria in the 1960s. Conversely, human rights and humanitarian laws in Southern countries are only likely to be supported by the North in countries where they have no economic interests (and perhaps not even then). In support of this conclusion he cited recent writings by Joseph Stiglitz, former World Bank Vice-President, and Stephen Byers, former UK Trade and Industry Secretary, who both argue that neo-liberal economic policies are at the root of many current conflicts.

The IMF is a major promoter of neo-liberalism through the conditions it imposes for loans or debt relief. When Ethiopia resolved to cut military expenditure and invest in civil reconstruction the IMF vetoed the spending. And when the IMF imposed a 'structural adjustment' policy on Sierra Leone in the mid 1980s, that country, famous for its rice production and until that time a net exporter of rice, became a net importer. The countries of the South are obliged to open up their borders to trade from the North, who simultaneously give their own producers subsidies and impose tariff barriers that block imports from the South. In this way the rich North gets richer and the poor South gets even poorer. There are an estimated 300 world conflicts (including ethnic conflicts) attributable to IMF policies, and 100 million more people living in poverty now than there were 20 years ago. This poverty itself breeds conflict, leading family members to rob each other and mothers to sell one of their children to the local militia in order to be able to feed the others.

The attack on the World Trade Center on 11th September 2001 has changed little in Africa, other than that the political and economic ambitions of the North are expressed more openly and crudely now, rather than being wrapped up in benign language. And as more oil and valuable minerals are found in Africa, there will be even more conflict.

In relation to West Africa, UK NGOs have greater scope than in other areas to influence British policy since Britain has no major strategic interests to defend there. This confronts them with an

ethical challenge to act effectively. A vital first step for the NGOs is to ensure that the dominance of the North is not reflected in their own internal structures and policies.

Panel presentations were followed by periods of plenary and group discussion. These sessions are summarised together below, and incorporate some comments made only in group work or alluded to only briefly during the final report back session.

Is our independence compromised?

A recurrent theme in the discussions was the dilemma NGOs face when they accept government funding. To what extent are they acting as a ‘moral fig leaf’ – legitimising government policy – when they accept government money and engage themselves in the processes of ‘peacebuilding’ and ‘democratisation’ once the bombs have stopped falling? Will their involvement become associated with ‘picking up the pieces’ for government, making it easier for government to keep acting in the same way? Will their work necessarily be limited to a government-imposed agenda? When such a large proportion of international NGO work is paid for with government money (85% according to one participant), it is a dilemma that few organisations can avoid.

Participants discussed their unease about engaging in government-funded post-conflict work when they had strong feelings about that government’s part in the conflict. The recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq present particular difficulties here. As individuals, many peace practitioners struggle to balance the long-term good of what they do with their short-term reservations about being (or being seen to be) part of a pacification and control programme. For one person, loyalty to long-term colleagues in a post-conflict area made it relatively easy to decide to continue working in a place where otherwise involvement might have presented a substantial moral difficulty. Another supported this approach, stressing the importance of long-term loyalty when so much international intervention is of a short-term nature.

One participant had found that it was possible to act ethically even in the most difficult of circumstances. Another felt that if NGOs ‘kept their hands clean’ by refusing Western government funding they would only be able to work at the margins and the situation might worsen. Who suffers if you decide not to get involved? The dilemma is particularly acute post-conflict, where there is in general no local government commitment to reconstructing civil society, and no local money to pay for it. In these circumstances, if anything is to be done, it *has* to be internationally funded, in spite of the difficulties that might present. Another person pointed out that it is only by engaging critically with funders and governments that we can hope to achieve anything.

The work of international NGOs is less likely to be perceived as government-led and imposed if it relates strongly to locally expressed needs and is done in collaboration with local groups. It remains true, however, that governments are unlikely to fund action that contradicts their political or economic aspirations, even when that action promotes peace. For example, one participant reported a recent interest in nonviolent action by Palestinian Fatah members that was not followed up because no external funding could be found. And even the presence of international NGOs in post-conflict areas can be used in ways that might compromise their values. Someone recalled an ongoing case where the UK authorities were resisting the application of a traumatised asylum seeker who had fled from a war zone, arguing that, because they had helped to create a trauma treatment programme in the country concerned, the applicant could be sent back and treated there.

There was general agreement about the importance of acknowledging the source of funding and of accounting fully, both to the communities in which NGOs are working and to the funders, for how it is being spent. Such openness serves not only to improve NGOs’ accountability, it also keeps them honest – removing the temptation to fudge issues of principle in order to avoid the risk of losing money for a good cause. Several participants observed that organisations which accept large amounts of government money seemingly indiscriminately were seen abroad as less accountable and their work was perceived as less valid. Nevertheless, there were several anecdotes of organisations ‘using the

margins of tolerance' (as one person put it) to take government money and use it for projects that were not strictly what the government intended. For example, two nuns in the Southern states of the USA ran consciousness-raising sessions for female migrant workers from Latin America, but dressed the sessions up as cookery classes, even to the extent of buying cakes for the women to take home.

Achieving change through 'critical collaboration'

When one participant was working in Ukrainian schools on conflict handling, he became aware that the work was being used for propaganda purposes by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education. Because the work seemed to be valued by teachers and pupils he decided to continue. (This approach was supported by other participants, who agreed that one needs to judge on a case by case basis whether the work one is undertaking has a net benefit.) He went on to say that it is important to remember that, as a foreigner, one is likely to be ignorant of many of the nuances of the attitudes one encounters.

While one's work may be open to manipulation by government agencies, either at home or abroad, there are almost always individuals working for good, even in the most corrupt of governments and the most difficult of circumstances. If peace workers can identify such people, and target their reports at them, the issues raised may have more hope of achieving results.

On the other hand we should not expect to believe in the good intentions of governments, whose primary interests (as one person reminded the meeting) are in keeping the populace quiet and under control. We need to remember that reality, and to look for opportunities to work within it to support movements for good.

Another person pointed out that no one is neutral. Even the most ethical person is, to some extent, compromised (if only by their bank account or pension fund). One can only achieve change through 'critical collaboration' – finding commonality with organisations with different objectives and using it as a lever for beneficial change. The example was given of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish businessman and diplomat whose efforts while attached to the Swedish delegation in Budapest saved upwards of 100,000 Jews from the gas chambers during World War II.

Truth Commissions provide another good example of critical collaboration, in that they contain the massive internal contradiction of being government funded vehicles for public acknowledgement of government wrongdoing. While this contradiction severely limits the amount of justice that they can deliver, they nevertheless provide a useful springboard for change.

One participant recalled how in the late 1980s the IRA changed its rhetoric and began to talk about its 'struggle for peace'. When quizzed about the honesty of the change of emphasis one IRA worker said "let's change the language and see what effect it has on the actions". Given the progress since that date, maybe even one's choice of words can be used as a lever for change.

Connecting with structural injustice

After violent conflict it is common for local people to be victimised and for civil society to be in a state of collapse. This is the current reality in Sri Lanka, where one participant remarked that it is hard for local people even to understand where international funding is coming from or what it is intended to achieve. For this reason some local peace workers prefer not to accept international money, but to depend on the support of activists within their own community. This puts a particular duty on international NGOs to be clear and open about their funding.

In such circumstances it is also important that INGOs take particular care in their reports and conversations (for example with Embassies, who are sometimes quite poorly informed) not to reveal confidential information or to name people who might then be compromised. Care about staff recruitment can also be important. One participant recalled a development agency that had lost the trust of local workers when it became apparent that they had employed someone who had been a US State Department official, with rumoured links to the CIA.

Longer-term injustices should not be forgotten either, and the work of ‘internationals’ should always be accompanied by an awareness of the wider structural injustices suffered by the countries in which they operate. It is important to acknowledge the past (and Britain’s less than glorious role) when working in countries that have suffered from it (“we were a colonial power” rather than “our countries have a long relationship”).

Acknowledging the long-term need

Most NGO organisations have experienced a decrease in core funding in recent years, and a corresponding increased dependency on project funding. This trend reduces their independence, not only because they are constantly competing for specific project funding, but because such funding tends to be short-term. More important is the impact of this short-term focus on post-conflict countries, whose needs continue long after the immediate flurry of government-funded activity.

For these reasons one participant argued that it was important for NGOs to do more to persuade governments to make a longer-term commitment. This need not necessarily lead to a substantial increase in spending. Too often, money is available for the expensive physical reconstruction of (for example) roads and buildings but not for the cheaper (but slower) reconstruction of civil society.

At present, the ‘international circus’ that descends on countries in the wake of conflict displaces all local functions, and when international interest and funding runs out leaves a void that is too often filled by criminal activity that further slows recovery.

A public voice at home

Many participants felt that the NGO community had a duty to make more effort to mobilise public opinion and change government attitudes at home, hard though this may be.

Properly speaking the citizen is the owner of public international affairs but increasingly, as one participant pointed out, Western governments determine policy unilaterally, allowing their citizens little voice other than as voters in a General Election. The language governments use is part of this co-option process. By describing NGOs as ‘PVOs’ they deny their independent status. Similarly, talk of ‘the human rights lobby’ reduces a public concern to a private enthusiasm.

Yet NGOs that work for awareness-raising and capacity-building abroad typically do little or nothing about the lack of public involvement at home. A more even-handed approach would not only be more honest, it might also reduce NGOs’ dependency on government funding by generating more public financial support, as well as providing local legitimacy for their ethical stance. Part of the problem may be that, while people are comfortable with the idea of working for change in other countries with small groups, at home they despair of the possibility of mobilising ‘the public’ at large. The fact that NGOs are constantly competing for funding may also make it harder for them to collaborate in developing public awareness.

NGOs with a strong ‘home base’ do better here because they are more likely to have an independent doctrinal framework debated and determined by home workers, as well as to have structures at home that can work for local awareness raising. They are also more likely to receive independent funding (for example from bequests).

It is often argued that the attention span of the public is very short, and that any public funding will therefore be as short-term as government money. The continued success of Comic Relief argues against this. For example, Comic Relief funding enabled IA to carry on working in Liberia after sanctions were imposed in 2001 and government support was cut off. This continued involvement is important (no matter how justified the sanctions) if the Liberian people are to be assisted in working for change. If the NGO community made more effort to work with the media at home, they might be able to produce a greater public interest in international affairs.

One person reminded the meeting that however distrustful one is of governments, there could be occasions on which their aims on a particular issue coincide with those of people engaged in conflict transformation work. Furthermore, notwithstanding the general truth that governments always pursue their own interests, those interests are, at least in part, determined by public pressures and demands. Though one may consider that it is inconsistent for the UK government to fund conflict prevention at the same time as invading Iraq, it is arguable that their current level of interest in conflict prevention is related to the degree of public opposition to that invasion.

Our role as individuals

Several participants emphasised that, in addition to our duties as professionals, whether in the area of conflict transformation or some other field, we do also have duties as citizens to speak out about, and try to influence, the policies of the government that claims to act in our name – although the difficulties of living up to this ideal in a ‘workaholic’ culture (while also honouring family commitments) were acknowledged. It was noted that some organisations make this ‘broad spectrum’ involvement easier to maintain. The Mennonite University, for example, earmarks 10% of a person’s working time for ‘activism’. For some, there is the added belief that one cannot work for peace in the community at large unless one is also working for peace individually and internally.

The scale of public opposition to the recent Iraq war was unprecedented, but it did not succeed in preventing it. Even so, it can be seen as worthwhile, because the UK government continues to pay the price of ignoring such substantial opposition, and because the world (and the war on Iraq itself) is different as a result of it. But it must be possible to do more. One participant reminded the meeting that, while 1.5 million marchers against the Iraq war seemed magnificent, 4.5 million people voted in a recent TV edition of Fame Academy. Of course, the voting was much less effort than the marching! If only one could influence government policy simply by pressing a button on a TV remote control.

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