

**ACCORD PROGRAMME, CONCILIATION RESOURCES
CENTRE FOR INTEGRATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES,
UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES**

**PUBLIC SEMINAR ON ENGAGEMENT OF ARMED GROUPS IN PEACE
PROCESSES**

**23 September 2005
University of the Philippines**

The previous presentation has looked at how opportunities for engagement of armed groups in peace processes can be created and some of the challenges which arise. In this presentation I want to look at some of the experiences of civil society in their engagement with armed groups and therefore look more at the process of engagement and some of the approaches used and their impact. I will do this looking at specific examples and in particular the insights of Terry Waite that are documented in the Accord publication. This means I will mainly refer to interactions between individuals from civil society and armed groups because they have been documented more fully but of course the wider community with which the armed group operates interacts informally with the armed group all the time. These interactions have been studied using an ethnographic approach and they show that the armed group has some level of influence on the community and the community also has some level of influence on the armed group. However they tend not to have access or describe the person to person interaction which I want to look at here.

Before looking at personal experience I would like to indicate 7 issues that we must be alert to in these situations:

1. Difference of perspective

- The armed group is normally operating outside the paradigm of social change which is held by those who are involved with conflict transformation
- The conflict transformation activist is normally working outside the paradigm of those committed to the use of force
- This does not mean that there cannot be common ground but there is a tendency to forget the different perspectives from which each is coming from and expect the other to adopt our paradigm

2. Respect is key

- In the Accord publication Alistair Crooke who worked with Hamas and other Muslim groups in Palestine says: “all Islamist factions subscribe to the wisdom that a ‘just’ outcome – that is, one that has legitimacy and therefore may endure – can only be achieved when both parties to a conflict arrive at the table treating the other as an adversary worthy of respect.” and then refers to the “first rule of conflict resolution” of US Senator George Mitchell who was involved in the Middle East conflict: “unless each party to a dispute acknowledges and accepts that the ‘Other’ has an argument for their side to advance, there can be no resolution.”

3. The issue of control

- By definition armed group operates in a context in which it is under threat and there are other forces that want to destroy it. Anyone,

including its own members, can make it vulnerable and so someone advocating a peaceful resolution to the conflict can appear dangerously naïve and in their naïvety they could unwittingly assist their enemies either by undermining their personal safety or their cause.

4. The third party interlocutor is vulnerable

- Because the interlocutor is a potential threat to the armed group and to the authorities, he or she is in turn vulnerable to suspicion and attacks on their personal security. They may also be at risk of criminal prosecution if contact with the armed group is proscribed under law. This is one of the unhelpful consequences of proscribing armed groups. Even if the civil society interlocutors have support from some section of the government and from the armed group, other elements may interfere with their attempts to offer good offices to the parties to the conflict.
- On the other hand their vulnerability can become a source of strength because it emphasises their lack of authority and therefore their limited capacity to control the process. As a result the parties may feel more comfortable to engage with them.

5. Setting the agenda for contact

- Given the earlier comments about control and threat, normally the armed group will set the agenda for who is available for discussion, what can be discussed and what questions can be asked.

6. The power of challenge

- While the civil society interlocutor has limited capacity to set the agenda for contact one should never underestimate the opportunity for challenge and the power of challenge. The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) who have worked closely in conflict resolution in many places, have used the expression “speaking truth to power.” In this context this means listening to the views of the armed group (and indeed a government) and then challenge the conclusions they draw if they seem unrealistic or if they will cause pain and suffering to the community. Because groups normally operate as an enclosed society they may not hear alternative perspectives or have to ignore them as a threat to their strategy. When they meet privately with an individual or group who does not wish to threaten them, then there is a better and safer environment to consider alternative perspectives.

7. Clarity about role

- The previous presentation indicated a variety of roles that a third party can undertake, but it is confusing if the same person or group tries to undertake a number of different roles. They may find that the roles are incompatible and something they do in one capacity may conflict with things they want to do in another role. Or their actions in one function may undermine their credibility in carrying out another role

In listing the different issue it was noted in some places that the same issue arises in dealing with the government and it will be evident that the same issues recur in many contexts, not just when we are engaging with an armed group. Many of the issues arose in the work of Terry Waite who was engaging with armed groups and we will

look now at some of the experiences he had and the insights he gained, drawing on his interview in Accord.

Terry Waite was the Advisor on International Affairs to the Archbishop of Canterbury who is the head of the Church of England and as such the leader of the Anglican community worldwide. In this capacity Terry was involved in negotiating the release of hostages in the middle east in the 1980s. He was successful in 1981 and in 1986 but in a third attempt in 1986/7 he was taken hostage himself and held until 1991.

He acknowledges that he entered the situation as an outsider with no knowledge of the Arabic language and will limited previous knowledge. He said it was difficult to get reliable information and insight into the situation and the key groups and individuals involved. This is a difficulty for all civil society actors (though less so for those who are part of the community) but it also acts as a valuable restraint which should stop them rushing to conclusions. Waite's approach was "to be sensitive, intuitive and hard headed". He listened and tried to get on the wavelength of the people. I sometimes say that we should hear everything but believe nothing is absolutely true. Although you can never be sure you can use what you are told to looking for meaning in the interaction. As Waite says it is more important to think why does the person say what they say and do what they do rather than working out if what they say is correct.

Terry also noted the suspicion that the groups felt towards him and this added an extra difficulty to understanding. He had to be blindfolded when he met the hostage takers. This meant he lost many of the visual cues we take for granted when we communicate and try to understand the person we are speaking to. We rely on more than the human voice but that was all that Terry had to go on.

He also stresses the importance of going one step at a time. His aim was to reach key decision makers. In other circumstances it may be more appropriate to work with the people who are offered as representatives of the group and hope they accurately convey the thinking of their principles and equally convey back the substance of the meeting accurately including important nuances which might be lost. In time a more influential person may be offered and there is a benefit in not having pushed to reach that person. But of course in some situations such as hostage taking time may be at a premium. This reminds me of experiences in Northern Ireland in the early 1990s.

At that time the Irish Republican Army were considering the potential of ending their campaign and wondering what would be the reaction in the Protestant community. They made contact with people in religious organisations and began a series of meetings. The initial meetings were rather frustrating for the representatives of civil society because they wanted to discuss issues but the Republicans wanted to explain their views and persuade their interlocutors to see things their way – even though the Republicans were entering into the dialogue to see the potential for change within the Protestant community. It was not a dialogue in which issues were discussed. But this phase may have been necessary before more genuine dialogue could take place. For others this may not have been necessary because the Republican movement did not feel that those interlocutors needed to be convinced of the Republican arguments even if they did not agree with them.

I am also reminded of a meeting that lasted several days at which an armed group was developing proposals for their negotiations. For the first time it agreed to include international experts because until that point it had seem that such people would weaken their position. During the meeting it became clear that the armed group wanted to make maximalist demands and saw the role of the experts was to confirm that the proposals were viable and not impossible to implement rather than if they would advance the negotiations. The expert group felt they would be failing in their duty to simply say such ideas could be implemented without saying something about the strategy of introducing maximalist demands. Therefore the group was asked directly to set aside some time for such a discussion. This was agreed and the participants from the armed group listened respectfully though there was only limited discussion. In the end the maximalist demands were made and perhaps the intervention was inappropriate and happened at the wrong time. In this context the international experts set the agenda and for them it was consistent with their role to be frank with the group and it is hoped that in the long term it was helpful for the armed group to experience a different style of interaction than what they experienced in other contexts.

Terry describes in some detail mistakes he made and they show the importance of being clear about one's role and also one's vulnerability in not being fully aware of what other actors in the conflict are doing.

In the course of his mission he visited the United States and met representatives of the US government because one of the hostages was a US citizen. They asked him to clarify what the hostages wanted and they asked to find if they wanted money. He was willing to do this as he saw it as something he wanted to find out in any case. When he met the hostage takers again he asked what they wanted and asked if they wanted money. At this point they got very annoyed and said you know it is not for money – the US knows what we want. Not only were they annoyed that they were being asked again what they wanted but they may also have been insulted that anyone would think they were looking for money.

It was a salutary lesson for Terry because he now realised that the US government were following its own agenda and not keeping him informed, but possibly he was being inadvertently used for the US agenda. Sometimes civil society interlocutors may be described as low level intelligence because without being part of the intelligence agencies they can provide information. And as a result the hostage takers were now more suspicious of him. He had no idea what other channels of communication they had and if the US had a direct channel of their own. Most interlocutors with armed groups do not talk widely about their involvement so each set of interlocutors are unaware of who else is involved and one has an image of the armed group in the centre as the only group who knows all the contacts that exist and are being used.

Terry Waite then was told by the group that they had relatives who were being held in gaol in Kuwait and they were being treated badly. They wanted them released. Terry felt able to say that he would try to find out about them because he felt that was consistent with what he would do in any situation and he was not responding to the threat to the hostages. He makes it clear that one of his principles is that he does not get involved in bargaining, but doing a deal is often convenient for governments and

other parties even if does not contribute to the long term resolution of the problem. They like a “quick fix”.

However he was not able to follow this up because shortly thereafter he was taken hostage himself. He believes that the reason was that the Iran Contra affair became public in which the US was implicated in selling arms to the Iranians and then using the money to finance the Contras movement. The key person involved was Oliver North whom it was known had Terry Waite had met and this heightened suspicion of him. It appeared that they seized him to find out what he knew. Again Waite was caught up in other agenda that influenced the way he was perceived.

In conclusion Waite draws a number of lessons which connect to the points raised at the beginning of this presentation:

- Respect – He says “resolve issues in a manner in which all parties can walk away with dignity”
- Partial understanding – never assume you completely understand
- Intuition is crucial
- Debriefing is essential – if you are working on your own it is important to have reliable trustworthy support people with whom you can talk through your experiences
- Know when you can do no more – do not remain involved just because you have good contacts if you are not making progress. Step aside and let someone else take on the task.
- Polarisation makes the task of the intermediary harder (but at the same time depolarisation may only come through the efforts of intermediaries)

Clem McCartney