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Spaces for difficult dialogue

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Spaces for difficult dialogue

Fanie du Toit

During a recent tenure as Visiting Fellow at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, USA, I was approached by Daniel Philpott, Professor of Political Science and Peace Studies, with a request to co-host a conference on peacebuilding in Africa.

– What would be different this time? There have been so many of these conferences, I asked Dan. His response, that this conference would focus on comparing bottom-up approaches to facilitate post-conflict socialisation through religious and cultural initiatives, not only convinced me that it would be worth pursuing. It also cohered perfectly with the mandate and vision of the organisation with which I had been associated for the past thirteen years, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR).

As the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission began to wind down, key figures within the Commission felt that this exact question, how to stitch together communities left broken and fragmented in apartheid's wake, had received inadequate attention during the life of the Commission, and needed further thought and carefully-constructed engagement. And so, in 2000, the IJR was born.

Fourteen years on, and after nearly two decades of democracy, South Africa faces enormous pressure on its already weakened social fabric. Catastrophic job losses associated with the international financial crisis, massive, uncontrolled

urbanisation and a faltering education system are combining to foment a “perfect storm” which, with increasing frequency, is spilling over from peri-urban slum areas into more well-to-do areas. It is as if the poor are telling the rich: “We are in this together. Our futures are interdependent. Inequality will, eventually, be as damaging to you as it has already been to us.”

This dilemma, of course, is not unique to South Africa. In the various post-conflict societies where the IJR is engaged, the restoration of a basic trust and cohesion, based on truth and justice, has proven elusive.

As Kenneth Lukuko, one of my IJR colleagues recently noted: “Have’s and Have-Not’s continue to live in vastly different worlds inside the same country. Their realities hardly touch sides, and they agree about so little. What we should be doing is creating spaces, where, at the very least, these groups can learn *to disagree together*.”

Cross-cutting debates

This idea, of creating spaces for difficult dialogue, is a core part of the IJR’s mandate, and precisely the focus of the conference, Peace From the Ground Up, that we report on in this publication. Itself a space for “disagreeing together”, the conference produced a series of fascinating panel discussions and cross-cutting debates about what, really,

constitutes post-conflict peacebuilding from the bottom up.

The conversation moved from the complex relationship between African and international frameworks for peacebuilding, such as Ubuntu, restorative justice and liberal peace, to key strengths and weaknesses of actors who work tirelessly for peace on an everyday basis. Here the conference benefited greatly from the presence of many “practitioner-scholars”, who could speak with first-hand experience of on-the-ground challenges, as well as with insights into key theoretical issues at stake. Finally the conversation turned to some of the resources, tools and practises which seemed to yield positive results, however counterintuitive they may seem at face value.

John Ashworth, a Catholic priest who has been at the forefront of peacebuilding in the Sudans for many years, noted that peacebuilding in Africa often simply means being with people in good times and bad, and being prepared to gain their trust incrementally by assisting in everyday mundane tasks with which no one else is prepared to help. “The last thing we ever thought was that we were engaged in peacebuilding. And yet it turned out that this was exactly what we were busy with”, he said.

I would like to thank the Life & Peace Institute, with whom the IJR has recently signed an important Memorandum of Understanding, for this opportunity to publish the results of a meeting we are proud to be associated with. My thanks to my colleague and friend Dan Philpott for his leadership and energy in making this event happen. And many thanks too, to my IJR colleagues, especially Felicia Thomas, for coordinating conference logistics in Cape Town. Thanks also to Tim Murithi for encouraging us to combine the outcome of the conference with this special focus on the Great Lakes Region. Finally, thank you to the colleagues and friends from across Africa who have sacrificed their valuable time to contribute to the insights produced here. I sense that this publication will contribute significantly towards making their sacrifice worth while. 

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