

Home group: reflections on dialogue practices and cultural differences

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Organizations involved in conflict resolution often use universal theories on conflict resolution for promoting their objectives. This article presents a direct experience from the field which questions this approach by calling for a more inclusive involvement, cultural adaptation and a close look at the local communication practices.

PULL QUOTE:

"As our judgment reflects our backgrounds, beliefs and the divisions of 'right' and 'wrong', it should be changed or at least be flexible when it engages with a different culture."

Communication is one of the most essential keys for making connections. Especially in conflict areas, the lack of contact between rival sides leaves each side with a distinctive impact on the perspective about the "other." Thus, both communication and personal contact are essential for creating empathy and transforming conflict. However, while writing these words, I need to take into consideration my own specific concept of "communication" or "empathy" and its relevance to different cultures and conflicts.

Speaking of conflict transformation, the concept I hold true about the "right" type of communication had slowly changed and expanded when I started to encounter a different culture through my internship in Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. Coming from the field of peacebuilding in the Israeli-Palestinian context, I hold a deep conviction about the importance of an open, honest and direct communication as a foundation for creating a shared understanding and increasing general compassion.

With that in mind, I started my internship in a local peacebuilding NGO in Myanmar. This country suffered a coup d'état shortly after the declaration of independence in 1948. Since 1962, a violent military regime has ruled the country with extreme nationalist-socialist practices, including isolating the country from the international community for 49 years. That period created one of the world's longest civil wars resulting in growing violence, extreme human rights violations, displacement and ethnic oppression. Since 2010, with general elections following the rise of the democratic opposition and the establishment of a federal state by Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar has started a process of opening itself to the world and healing its internal conflict. However, despite the launch of the 2011 peace process initiative, the transition is slow, and the country is still bleeding from the internal religious-ethnic conflicts, which result as well in hate speech, distrust, discrimination and the displacement of the minority group, the Rohingya people.

The NGO at which I interned focuses mainly on the broad context of interfaith dialogue and human rights advocacy. Reviewing the agenda of one of the interfaith dialogue projects, I was

critical of the lack of interpersonal encounters. Hence, I suggested adding to the schedule an activity that I was practicing and using regularly in different dialogue encounters in Israel/Palestine, known as the “empathy group”. This activity, I believe, could catalyze the transformative effect by initiating interpersonal encounters. In this practice, a small diverse group of individuals meet habitually at the end of each day, aiming to achieve a personal connection with the other side. Through giving and receiving empathy, sharing life stories and regular reflections, participants are able to understand one another more deeply, connect to the other, and transform their conflictual perspective into one of connection.

As much as I was trying to explain the intention of an open circle of sharing feelings and personal experiences, built on the concept of empathy as I know from Non-Violent Communication, I felt that the locals did not understand what these concepts truly meant (or, perhaps, more accurately, what *I MEAN* by using these terms). My local colleagues decided eventually to adapt these ideas and name the activity “home groups”. This adaptation deeply resonated with the basic concept of empathy but in practice it missed the main purpose of the activity as the sharing in the groups remained on the intellectual level, while avoiding sharing deep feelings or life stories.

In the beginning I felt frustrated and misunderstood. But with time I learned that I was just judging it from my own biased perspective. Being forced to confront our own judgments is a very common experience in the field of development. **As our judgment reflects our backgrounds, beliefs and the divisions of “right” and “wrong”, it should be changed or at least be flexible when it engages with a different culture.** If not, keeping the prejudices and preconceptions can lead to intrusion and eventually to causing more harm.

In some ways, a judgment that is not open to local contexts resembles what happens in conflict areas. In conflicts, each side holds strong views and beliefs about the other which creates the division of us vs. them, the “right” vs. the “wrong”. In order to be able to transform a conflict, we need to adopt a development practitioner’s approach, which highlights the importance of local perspectives. Meaning: the tools to transform conflicts, like raising communication between rival sides, must emerge from a cultural context, and more specifically, from local communication practices through which we are expressing ourselves, communicating with the other, and are able to bridge those divisions.

This was very clear in my experience in Myanmar. The culture in this country is more reserved than the direct communication I know from Israel. Influenced as well by the history of oppression, fear and mistrust are present in the already indirect communication practices of Myanmar’s local culture of communication. Thus, when planning a project according to the local context and using the ethic of ‘do no harm,’ I was asking myself how we could practice empathy in an indirect culture. Since “empathy groups” as a means for interfaith dialogue may be successful in a direct culture but unsatisfactory in reserved cultures.

Therefore, especially in a conflict area, where the power had been taken away from the local people, there is a special need for a community-based approach to peace building. In this

approach, locals will determine their peace building activities according to their own values and needs and not according to general theories of conflict transformation. Such an approach will not only advance conflict resolution but will serve as another method for local empowerment as well. In this context, giving power to individuals to decide upon their peace-building activities will mean giving them a voice that probably had been taken away due to the presence of the conflict. When referring to communication practices such as feeling-based sharing in empathy groups, that voice can be given a new meaning, even if that meaning might be translated differently into different communication practices.

Hence, a community-based approach to peace building might look quite different in different community contexts. Development, from its holistic perspective, must look at the wide influences on society and accordingly modify its methods creatively. This does not negate incorporating successful practices of different peace-building activities such as empathy groups, but encouraging extra attentiveness to and awareness of the cultural context and creative adaptation led by the community itself.

We should bear in mind though, that especially in development practice there is the element of cultural exchange that impacts the local society. Especially when speaking about communication, in that exchange between different cultures, like development practitioners and the communities, the key is in communication. That key is opening both the direct and the indirect communication doors. Thus, we must not hesitate to act, as we never know when our activities might inspire the opportunity for a shared growth.

I felt that growth when a local coworker invited me to her village a few weeks ago. After a long walk in the village visiting several relatives, we were sitting in a circle on the floor with her family. While they were speaking, she whispered to me how much she enjoys these moments with her family. She explained that she used the term "home group" for the activity I introduced in that interfaith project since for her, her family is her empathy group.

I was deeply touched by this moment. And when she asked me if I understood what she meant, I told her that I did. Because maybe the term was used differently, but that day was so full of love, respect, togetherness and care; which is everything an empathy group is supposed to be. Empathy is universal, and though it might be called by different names, found in different circles and situations, and expressed differently in different cultures, it remains part of peace building work. In Myanmar, as I learnt, empathy groups can be different and can mean simply sitting on the floor with the close family. However, and despite the difference, it can still transform our views of the "others" through empathy, and through his address the main goal, which is peace building, and not the activity itself.