

"Bridging Conflict Prevention and Human Rights: A Dialogue between Critical Communities"

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Assumptions and underlying values.

I guess the most basic assumption underlying my work is the belief that underneath all the layers of cultural and historical realities of the world's different communities there really is such a thing as 'our common humanity'. My work in the past (and what I see as the mandate of my work in the future) has been to approach the various social conflicts that exist in Thailand by understanding thoroughly the outer layers, peel them away to expose this deep and in many cases hidden common foundation, and then use a combination of all of these parts to participate in creating a just and peaceful reconciliation.

I also believe that for peacemaking and the promotion of human rights to be successful, these activities must eventually become part of the mainstream of society and not remain on the fringe. One way that this can become a reality is to create a sense of ownership in society concerning the very idea of human rights. In this context I understand the universality of human rights as the universality of the yearning of human beings to live together in peace in a just society, rather than the universality of our ideas at a particular time of how this can be accomplished.

No Peace without Justice: from battle cry to definition.

From my work in Thailand I have found that there are at least three tasks which mechanisms created for the peaceful resolution of violent, or potentially violent, conflicts must accomplish in order to increase their chance of success. These tasks have created a close bond between most of the conflict resolution and human rights communities, and in many cases, such as my own, they have become indistinguishable.

The first task is to reach a common understanding of the meaning of what a "peaceful resolution" is. Though this may seem to be obvious my experience has been that the differences that exist in this matter are substantial and become an obstacle to even beginning the difficult work that has to be done. Let me mention two examples. Last year I participated in a meeting in Nan province in Northern Thailand where various groups met to discuss how to deal with the conflict over resources between the lowlanders and the Hmong highlanders which had turned violent. One of the officials in the meeting told the gathering that he had been assigned the task of solving this conflict in a peaceful manner, and that he had found a solution that was only waiting for implementation. An important part of the solution that he had come up with involved the sterilization of the Hmong highlanders since he believed the increasing numbers of this population was one of the main causes of the conflict. Upon questioning he stated that in his understanding this was a "peaceful" resolution, namely, letting the present group of Hmong stay, but guaranteeing that the numbers of this group would steadily decrease, seemed to him to be a peaceful compromise. Though it was not possible to tell how many in the room shared his understanding of what a peaceful resolution entailed, and though I am fairly certain no such plan would ever be implemented, just the seeming acceptance of this idea as an option was disconcerting.

The second example comes from a somewhat different perspective, the perspective of those who have chosen to take up arms to resolve their conflict with governments. In discussions with members of such groups in Mindanao (MILF in the Philippines) and the Karen State (KNU in Burma), the view often expressed to me was that justice must come before peace, and that peacemaking might compromise struggles for social justice, hence the battle cry "No Peace without Justice". But I think this battle cry is actually a statement giving part of the meaning of peace. A peaceful resolution of a conflict includes as part of its meaning a 'just' resolution, and so there can never be two opposed directions, one aiming towards justice and one aiming towards peace. Mechanisms that ensure human dignity are necessary for the success of peacemaking mechanisms. These two types of mechanisms are in theory, and in practice, inseparable. Though attempting to reach a common understanding of what a 'peaceful' resolution is makes the other tasks clearer, the downside is that peace may now need a justification, and the first task ends by each society or country having to find its reason for peace.

The second task which peacemaking mechanisms must accomplish is that of discovering the root cause of the various conflicts in order to begin the search for a lasting peaceful resolution. *In many situations the difficulty in finding lasting solutions to conflicts is often because what is being addressed is not the real cause of the conflict but rather the result of the real cause not being addressed.* One example of this is the confusing of the desire for a place in society with respect and dignity, with aspirations for independence. We can attempt to address this second task by dealing with these causes through other mechanisms of society such as educational institutions and the media. A little knowledge of history can go a long way towards the changing of attitudes. The difficulty of identifying the root cause and having it accepted by society-at-large, though, is often the main obstacle that peacemaking must overcome.

The third task is to affirm publicly, in writing, what the root cause that is believed to have led to the conflict is and what steps the country needs to take to eradicate this cause. This may be in the form of an official policy or some other form of document. An example is Thailand's present National Security Policy for the Southern Border Provinces. (The majority of people living in the southern border provinces of Thailand are of Islamic faith and Malay ethnicity, which makes them a roughly 4% minority in the country.) This policy states that the foundation for National Security lies in the acceptance of the dignity of each person, mutual respect among members of society, and the acknowledgement of the value of cultural diversity. The manner in which such documents are effective probably vary from country to country. For some countries they may act as a mini 'social contract', while for others they may be the rationale needed to convince people to attempt to undergo serious changes of attitude and perception. For Thailand it has been both. Whatever situation a country finds itself in, the value of such documents for peacemaking should not be underestimated, as we have discovered.

To further increase the chance of success of the undertakings of these peacemaking mechanisms, one more dimension might be worth adding. For Thailand, the second task mentioned above has involved our ability to examine our society's own prejudices. Since those who are part of these mechanisms are at the same time part of society, this has at times posed a barrier, as good intentions are not always enough to overcome these blind spots. Human frailties and social prejudices can form a deadly combination, and if left unchallenged provide a formidable opponent to peacemaking efforts. In such cases the cooperation with peacemaking mechanisms

in other countries may be of assistance in dealing with this problem if this other country is culturally similar enough to have useful insights which can identify these blind spots, but not too similar so that it shares the same prejudices. In these circumstances, peacemaking becomes another way of bringing the nations of the world closer together.