

Review

Asia 2012

Peace Practitioners' Research Conference (PPRC)

Siem Reap, Cambodia

The Center for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS)' idea of holding a conference with the aim of bringing together peace builders- practitioners, scholars, researchers, researching practitioners- was realized and held in Siem Reap, Cambodia, at the Apsara Angkor Hotel, from 6th to 8th December 2012. The main goal of the Peace Practitioners' Research Conference (PPRC) was to create a platform for a fruitful exchange of experience, expertise and lessons learned between peace builders from all over Asia. The objectives were (1) to share learning from existing field research as well as research initiated by peace practitioners, (2) to document as well as circulate lessons learned, experiences and research findings/analyses for wider groups of people in the field; and (3) to draw theory from published works.

The Conference brought together peace builders from more than 20 different countries. The group of attendants was multicultural, multilingual and of different religions. The group consisted of very experienced and senior peace workers, scholars and researches but also of young scholars still enrolled in Masters degrees or PhDs at Asian universities, and young practitioners working for grass-root NGOs in the field. The participants were mainly from South East Asia and South Asia. But there were also some exceptions: a peace builder from Somalia, peace workers from Afghanistan, two professors from the United States, a senior peace building expert from England, a PhD candidate from Spain and a peace builder from Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Structure of the Conference

The Conference consisted of two and a half days. The first day of the Conference comprised a joint session, followed by four seminars in the afternoon- always two concurrent seminars. The second day directly started with the next four seminars- also two concurrent seminars. The afternoon of the second day was dedicated to two plenary sessions. The moderators of the eight seminars reported each on their seminar. The Conference concluded with a plenary that invited participants to reflect on experiences, impressions and feelings during the PPRC. After the closing of the Conference, an optional Angkor Wat tour was organized for participants who wanted to see the beautiful Angkor Temples.

Course of Events during the Conference

I. Opening

The Conference started on 6th December 2012 with an introductory speech by the CPCS Director Emma Leslie. She started with elaborating on the domains CPCS focuses on: (1) To discover the Asian perspective of peace, (2) to focus on capacity building, (3) to focus on research and publications aiming at influencing policy and peace building practices in Asia. She emphasized that the time spent at the Conference should be taken to look at regional peace research and how it can be applied to local contexts. Mrs Leslie's speech was followed by an introductory speech by Soth Plai Ngarm, the

visionary behind the Conference. Mr Soth Plai described the purpose of the Conference, namely to bring people together and to share knowledge and experience in the area of peace building. Furthermore, he offered a description of what it means to be a peace practitioner: to be willing to go beyond theory and towards application of theory- be it as field worker or academic.

This was followed by a key note speech delivered by Dr. Bilveer Singh, Associate Professor at the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) at the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore. In his dynamic and encouraging speech, Dr.Singh emphasized how important and intense in time it was to rebuild relations and mutual trust among former enemies in a region like Southeast Asia that, over history, has become a synonymous with violence. He mentioned the fact that making war was easier than building peace and that the profit of war was enormous.

His speech looked at today's challenges to peace in Southeast Asia. For instance, the conflict around the South Chinese Sea is a nexus of different types of conflicts. In the context of today's numerous challenges to peace in Asia he emphasized the importance of bringing peace builders and scholars together and to build strong relationships among them. He praised the coming together of Asian peace builders in Cambodia at the occasion of the PPRC and described Cambodia as a laboratory for peace studies. By encouraging the audience to work for hegemony of peace he closed his inspiring speech.

This was followed by the first presentations on post-war peace building. *The first paper* was presented by a Nepali peace builder. The main question of the research was how to deal with ex-combatants in a post-conflict environment. The research concluded that dealing with ex-combatants risked becoming politicized, that clarity in a peace agreement was extremely important and that there must be a minimum political will of ex-combatants to engage in DDR in order to make it successful. *The second presenter* was a Lecturer from Indonesia who analyzed peace building efforts in post-authoritarian Aceh. The researcher stressed the need for a transformational leadership that had a comprehensive understanding of problems at macro and micro level and that encouraged people to begin with self-transformation in a post-conflict situation. *The third paper* was presented by the Secretary General of the New Aceh Consortium. It analyzed the role of civil society in the peace process in Aceh.

II. Seminars

In eight different seminar sessions, a total number of 32 research papers on peace building in various post-conflict contexts, countries and communities across Asia were presented.

There was a broad scope of themes discussed during the different seminar sessions. Participants presented papers on peace building related to their area of expertise in their specific work or research context. This made it possible for their fellow peace practitioners to be inspired by new ideas and approaches that were brought up. For instance, a Somali peace builder was struck by the similarity between the conflict situations in Afghanistan and in Somalia. He was inspired by the way local dispute resolution councils were organized in Afghanistan. Another example was the expert in peace education from Imphal in Northeast India. He and a Bosnian peace researcher who is doing her PhD in Political Science at the University of Sains in Malaysia engaged in interesting discussions on the role peace education plays in the two countries.

Seminar I: Peace Process, Settlement and Third Party Intervention. *The first paper* was presented by a peace builder from Afghanistan and ACTS graduate. He analyzed *the Future of Peace Negotiations in*

Afghanistan and suggested that the peace process in his country should be a comprehensive process that addressed the root causes of the conflict and focused on more than one ethnic group. As well, he pointed out that there should be an insider approach to the peace process with a good understanding of the realities on the ground. It also became clear that there was a real danger that the country could face another civil war if the Americans and their Western allies did not handle the withdrawal of their troops in a cautious way.

The second presenter was an English/American peace builder and researcher working for CPCS. The paper looked at the *Peace Process and International Third Party Support in Myanmar*. The research analyzed in a very thorough way the uniqueness of Myanmar's ongoing peace process. It furthermore explained that there was an unparalleled coordination between third parties. However, it was not clear whether this coordination happened because of a genuine interest in the peace process or because of other motivations. The paper also stressed that third parties involved in the peace process should be self-reflective and self-critical of their work.

The third research paper was on *Building Relationship Among Women Politicians in Political Transition of Nepal*. The Nepali peace builder emphasized that good working relations and solidarity between different female politicians across party lines could lead to power and leverage in the fight against patriarchal power structure in Nepali politics.

In sum, the researchers presenting in this seminar emphasized that third-party involvement in peace processes could have a positive impact but should be handled cautiously. Furthermore, the involved third-parties needed to have a good understanding of the complex dynamics and structures of post-conflict situations. As well, external parties must be aware of its responsibilities in the process.

Seminar II: Peace, Human Security and State-Engagement. *The first paper* looked at *State-citizen engagement in local governance for building sustainable peace in Nepal*. It emphasized the importance of the role of local governance in building sustainable peace. Furthermore, it argued that peace initiatives at national level needed to be linked to those at local level so that effects and efforts were felt by citizens.

The second paper titled *Protracted Conflict between Manipur and India: ethnic conflict in Manipur*; analyzed the system and structure and the historical roots of the ethnic conflict in Manipur. The research emphasized the importance of addressing structural violence, the need for mutual respect of different identities, the need for inclusivity and that political power should be handled responsibly.

The third paper was presented by a peace builder and professor from the Center for Peace Education in the Philippines. The presentation offered background information on the implementation efforts of the *UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in the Philippines* that have successfully increased awareness of the important role women play in building peace.

The fourth paper was presented by a PhD candidate and coordinator of the Mindanao Peace Program at the University of Sains in Malaysia. The research was titled "*The challenge in conflict communities in Mindanao: putting the rights of self-determination in the equation of human development*". It looked in a sophisticated way at the relationship between sustainable human development and the attainment of sustainable peace in Mindanao and at the question if self-determination can promote peace. It concluded that sustainable human development can be effective in promoting peace if it is part of a bigger peace building process.

Seminar III: Community Empowerment, Peace and Justice

During this seminar, the following papers were presented and discussed: *Peace building within community: Enhancing the knowledge, skills and capacity in the context of Malaysia*. In his paper, the

researcher from Malaysia stressed the importance of community empowerment as integral part of peace building efforts in Malaysia.

The second paper was presented by a peace practitioner from Pakistan. The paper analyzed *community empowerment through poverty alleviation and peace building practice in Pakistan*. It underlined the importance of community organizations in peace building efforts.

The third research paper presented by a senior peace builder from Bangladesh, discussed the subject of village courts and restorative justice within the retributive system in Bangladesh. It elaborated on the question of how far village courts could contribute to healing and reduce the likelihood of future offences. During the Q&A session, the question was raised how far women were involved in these village courts. The presenter said that women's involvement would take time. However, he underlined that women already profited today from the village courts.

Seminar IV: Peace building through gender, faith and civil society. *The first paper* presented by a Cambodian researcher from the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI), argued that grass- root civil society organizations brought vibrancy and dynamism into political life in Cambodia and played a critical role in sustaining Cambodian peace.

The second paper was presented by a senior peace education expert from the Philippines. It reported on a twinning project between Muslim and Christian youth in the Philippines. The project helped to raise the students' awareness of their powerful role in peace building.

The last paper discussed the potential and powerful role that women can play in traditional dispute resolution mechanisms in Afghanistan. Interestingly, the research came to the conclusion that men's attitudes towards the inclusion of women in these forums tended to be positive.

Seminar V: The role of Education, Media and IT in Peace Building. A creative research paper was the one on the role of IT in promoting a culture of peace. It was presented by a Professor and senior IT expert from Malaysia. During her presentation, the professor encouraged peace practitioners and researchers to start using the very powerful tool of IT in promoting peace. She suggested that IT tools, being merely tools, could be powerful in promoting a culture of peace by empowering and connecting people and by facilitating communication across borders.

The second paper presented the strategic conflict analysis that was undertaken by an Afghan NGO in the context of its reconciliation efforts in Southern Afghanistan. The paper assessed furthermore the structural and symbolic dimensions of the conflict. During the Q&A session in this seminar, the Afghan presenter was asked whether there was any mechanism at community level to cover the gap between community level and government action. The answer was that, if used properly, foreign development projects could help to fill this gap and can be good mechanisms for conflict mitigation.

Thirdly, a Bosnian PhD candidate from the University of Sains in Malaysia presented her research on the role of education in the creation of sustainable peace in Bosnia. The paper explained how education had been used to divide Bosnian society and to perpetuate ethnic conflict dividing communities with different religions. It argued that it was important to focus on education as a tool for promoting peace and to develop a curriculum containing a shared (by different ethnic groups) narrative of history in order to achieve sustainable peace in post-conflict Bosnia.

Seminar VI: Approaches and models in peace building and conflict transformation. *The first paper* was an academic research delivered by a professor from the University of Southern Philippines, Mindanao. The researcher used the common indicators framework for measuring peace outcomes. The paper aimed at identifying context-sensitive indicators for measuring peace outcomes. It also discussed the implications and risks of using these indicators.

The second presenter, also an academic from Mindanao, used qualitative and quantitative research methods to develop a peace building model for the Southern Philippines. The research revealed that social cohesion and the provision of basic social needs were fundamental in building sustainable peace.

The third presenter, a peace builder from Sri Lanka, presented his action research on community-based water resource management as a conflict mitigation tool and management process in the Sri Lankan tea plantation communities. Community-based water resource management proved to be a good tool for conflict mitigation.

The fourth presenter, a peace practitioner from Mindanao, stressed the capacity and potential of grass root organizations and communities in attaining stability and peace in the Southern Philippines. She argued that, by empowering and including them in peace building efforts, there was hope for long lasting peace.

Seminar VII: Conflict Management through state mechanism. *The first paper* was from a PhD candidate from the University of Sains in Malaysia. The research analysed conflict management efforts between Malaysia and Indonesia. It argued that the two conflicting countries should move from an elitist (involving only government officials) to a populist (involving also non-governmental organisations and actors) approach. Through this presentation, the audience learned more about the nature of this conflict. It could understand the rationale behind the argumentation for a shift of paradigm in managing this conflict involving non-governmental organisations and non-officials from the two countries in peace work.

The second paper was also an academic research. It had been conducted by two academics from Mindanao from the Institute of Bangsamoro Studies. The paper was on land conflict in Mindanao. It was explained that land issues were both main causes and effects of the conflict in Mindanao and that there were structural violations of land rights. The presenters recommended *inter alia* that the regulation and distribution of land should be devolved to the Bangsamoro State. Furthermore, they stressed the importance of the set-up of an independent commission to receive and hear issues on land conflict.

The third paper was from a Master's candidate and researcher from the University of Penang in Malaysia. It looked at the role of the Malaysian government in handling the ethnic conflict. It stressed the need for institutional capacity development in order to have a government that is efficient in conflict resolution and peace promotion.

The fourth paper was from a Spanish PhD candidate in International Relations. The research was a sophisticated analysis of narratives contained in strategic frameworks for peace building. These frameworks comprise implicit narratives and risk naturalizing certain views of a conflict context. The research encouraged to critically look at the stories of peace building and to also to take into account bottom-up narratives.

During the Q&A session, it became obvious that this was a thought-provoking session that encompassed studies on peace building efforts and challenges to them at global, regional and community level.

Seminar VIII: Conflict history, social and environmental issues. *The first paper* was presented by a PhD candidate in Political Science from the University of Sains in Malaysia. The research looked at the roots of hostility and aggression in the context of the conflict in Southern Thailand. It argued that there was a divide and rule approach and an assimilation policy of the dominant group.

The second paper was from a Pakistani peace practitioner. He elaborated on the conflict history of Balochistan, one of Pakistan's poorest regions however with vast natural resources. The research showed that poverty and illiteracy were critical issues for conflict and peace in this region. This presentation gave interesting background information on a little known region of Pakistan.

The third paper was from a peace practitioner from Negros Oriental in the Philippines. The action research was on the effects of mining on the environment and peace situation in selected municipalities in Negros Oriental. Like the Balochistan case, Negros Oriental is rich in natural resources. But poverty remains high and the exploitation of natural resources through mining is a source of conflict and violence. During the seminar it became clear that the link between peace building and environmental issues/challenges could and should be further explored.

III. Closing

The closing of the Conference was done by Professor Kathryn Poethig from the University of Berkeley in California. The interactive session gave participants the opportunity to reflect themselves on their experiences and feelings during the Conference. Professor Poethig encouraged the participants to reflect on the issues that struck and inspired them the most and to then write them down and to take the notes home as a personal memory and reminder of what was experienced, shared and learned during the PPRC. In a next step, the attendants were asked to write down and to reply to very simple but relevant questions related to the Conference and to then pass the paper on to their neighbours. Upon completion of all answers to the questions, the former were shared anonymously with the audience. Listening to the very personal answers to questions like: "how did I feel before coming to the Conference?" was a good way of sharing personal experiences and emotions. Also, it was an efficient approach to give and share feedback and at the same time a decent manner to close the Conference. In parallel, there was also a more formal way of giving feedback by completing a feedback form anonymously.

Feedbacks

Overall the feedback from the participants was very positive.

The set-up and structure of the program was received well. The information presented and the topics of the presentations were relevant to the attendants.

The moderators received good feedback as well. However, there seems to be room for improvement with regard to the way the moderators handled the time allocation for presenters. Some of the latter felt they did not have enough time for their presentations. Also, it seems important for a future Conference that the moderators receive a more detailed briefing about what their role is supposed to be and what the expectations are related to the handling of seminars.

The documents and the material provided to the participants were appreciated as well as accommodation and food during the Conference. Also the overall organization and the logistical arrangements received a very positive feedback.

Observations

The attitude of participants during the Conference was professional, interested and positive. The peace builders and practitioners were eager to learn from each other and to share and exchange information and experiences on peace building practice and theory in Asia. There was a lot of formal and informal exchange. Those attending seemed to appreciate a lot getting the opportunity to participate in the PPRC and they worked hard and came well-prepared.

During the Conference, several key themes appeared and it became clear that to address them was of high importance in order to resolve conflict and build peace. Firstly, many papers stressed that understanding the local context, the actors and the history of the conflict in question were crucial in attempting to do successful peace work. In this context, the topic of identity came up repeatedly. Secondly, many presenters pointed out the high relevance of human development, the provision, the fair distribution and sharing of public goods in order to try to achieve just and sustainable peace. Fourthly, many researchers and practitioners emphasized the important role women play and should play in peace building.

In addition, the need for more research on the link between environment and peace building emerged. Also, to use IT as a tool for promoting peace is clearly a topic to be further explored.

Future PPRCs

For future PPRCs, the challenge will be on the one hand to provide capacity-building with regard to writing research papers and on the other hand to keep high standards when selecting research papers for the PPRC.

The next Peace Practitioners' Research Conference is already planned for December 2013. From CPCS side, more time will be dedicated to look into the research papers and to give feedback. The selection process will be more rigorous, with stricter guidelines for papers and presentations. The overall structure will be re-designed and thought-through again. The approach will probably be more interactive.