



## Reflections on 2013 Peace Practitioners' Research Conference

*"When I came to the conference I felt like a frog in the pan - not knowing what is happening in the field of conflict transformation in Asia. Now, at the end of the conference I feel like a frog in the lotus flower, having a much better overview and idea of what is going on."*

Sotheavy Chea, intern at Kdei Karuna, Cambodia

*"I realise that my country is not the only one that experiences deep inter-ethnic hatred and violence. It gives me hope and motivates me to see that in other conflict contexts and countries non-violent transformation of ethnopolitical conflict has been relatively successful."*

Hasrat Hussain, Director of Research Department, Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, Afghanistan

From 6-8 December 2013, the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies hosted the Second Asian Peace Practitioners' Research Conference in Siem Reap, Cambodia, convening 40 Asian peace practitioners and scholars from 17 countries, such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. With a wide array of participants, ranging from a Moro peace practitioner from Mindanao/Philippines to a Christian pastor promoting peace and women's rights in Myanmar, the conference focused on the transformation of identity-based conflict in Asia, engaging participants in dynamic discussion on how identity can trigger, perpetuate and transform conflict.

It would go beyond the scope of this paper to review the multitude of subjects and approaches to transforming identity based conflict discussed and presented at the conference.

This short review aims to grasp a sample of the many cross-cutting themes that emerged from group and seminar discussions, presentations and Q&A sessions. The review is based on my personal observations and insights as a facilitator and participant.

### **Identity considerations**

Throughout the conference, participants realised that each of us possess multiple identities that are fluid rather than fixed, and take on a variety of forms (geographical, ethnic, religious, ideological, economic, social). It was discussed that identity formation is – unfortunately- often based on exclusion of 'the other', or, the idea of what 'we are not'.

Participants agreed on the need for better understanding of our identities as peace builders. To become more effective in our peace work, we must begin with ourselves and develop a greater comprehension of who we are as individuals, the ways in which our own identities are shaped and how they affect our personal attitudes, behaviours and perspectives.

### **Cross-cutting themes in the context of triggering or transforming identity-based conflicts in Asia**

During the conference, cross-cutting themes such as the role of language; media (especially social media); geopolitics; and colonialism emerged.

#### **1. Language**

The language factor was raised in numerous discussions: Language and its use is a delicate issue and is closely linked to identity considerations at the personal, group, regional, national and international level.

How we frame issues, the terminology we use for actors in conflict contexts, for political entities and nations alike - all play an important role in the transformation of identity-based conflict. Often by the mere use of a particular, term we associate ourselves with certain groups, become part of a 'for or against camp', or reveal our personal views and perspectives. For example, when we talk about the religious minority in the state of Arakan/Myanmar: do we use the term Rohingyas or Bengali in the absence of a more neutral term for this identity group? It is important to ask ourselves: from where do denominations of groups or individuals originate and what is their inherent meaning?

As peace practitioners, we must be careful with the language we use – it is important to remind ourselves of the possible negative connotation of expressions, names or denominations of groups. As

much as we can, we should try to use inclusive, positive and neutral terms for identity groups, political entities, institutions and actors in conflict contexts.

**Framing:** Not only the terms we use as peace practitioners, but also how we frame concepts in our analyses, in discussions and in public spaces is of great importance and has to be considered in efforts to transform identity-based conflicts.

**National language:** At national level, language and its use is also closely linked to recognition of identity groups, inclusion, exclusion, domination and oppression. Language can contribute to more unity or divide identity groups: Is my language or dialect recognised by the rest of identity groups in my country? Is my language and its use ridiculed, banished, am I being excluded or threatened if I use this language? What is taught at school? Can I express myself in my own language without being excluded or not taken seriously?

One marker of identity groups (often minorities) is oftentimes a distinct language and in many cases language is used as a tool for exclusion. To transform identity-based conflict constructively and non-violently, it is essential take this factor into account and work towards/lobby for an inclusive use of language at regional and national level that ensures the languages of minorities are also respected and represented.

## 2. (Social) media

**Journalism/conflict sensitive reporting:** In several presentations, researchers emphasised the role of journalism in triggering or constructively transforming identity-based conflict. The importance of raising awareness among journalists, especially young journalists, on conflict sensitive reporting was emphasised repeatedly. Participants stressed that journalists' use of language has such a big impact on peoples' perceptions of terms that are and are not acceptable, possibly fuelling already existing tensions between polarised identity groups by using derogatory terms for certain identity groups or contributing to more positive relationships between these groups by reporting in a conflict-sensitive way.

In many contexts, decades of oppression and censorship have resulted in a lack of understanding of what peaceful speech is (vs. hateful). People have not grown up with civic responsibility – hence the importance of raising awareness among journalists regarding conflict-sensitive reporting.

**Role of social media:** Many participants emphasised the importance of social media in transforming identity-based conflict. Social media is easily accessible, the level of censorship is low and the speed and dissemination of messages is very high. The combination of these factors make social media such as Facebook and Twitter ideal tools for promoting positive relationships between different identity groups, thereby contributing to the transformation of identity-based conflict.

At the same time, these factors, especially that of low level of censorship (everyone can write and comment whatever she or he wants) makes it easy to spread messages of hatred, can be used to politically manipulate people, thus also bearing the potential for triggering identity-based conflict. For example, Hasrat Hussain, peace researcher and human rights activist from Afghanistan, emphasised that in his country social media is being used to spread inter-ethnic hatred, to dehumanise and discriminate other identity groups, leading to more mistrust and contributing to the deepening of cleavages between already deeply divided ethnic groups. He warns of possible tragic consequences of this development such as ethnic cleansing (!).

Against this background, encouraging the responsible use of social media is of great importance. Social media also has the potential to strengthen social, religious and inter-ethnic interaction and can thereby play an important role in transforming identity-based conflict. For example, Karim Mangi, an experienced peace builder from Pakistan emphasised that in Sindh, Pakistan, that has a long history of ethno-political conflict, social media is being used increasingly to promote broader political participation, which is essential in the reconciliation process between opposing ethnic groups, the Sindhis and the Mohajir.

## 3. Geopolitics

**Geopolitics:** Throughout the conference, geopolitics was a subject that was discussed repeatedly. Participants continually reminded each other that in all efforts to transform identity-based conflicts constructively, we should never forget the broader perspective and keep in mind the geopolitical dynamics at play in the Asia region (and of course globally) because these have an important impact on peace and conflict in the region.

For example in Myanmar, a country abundant with natural resources, initiatives that aim to transform identity-based conflicts need to take into account the interest of regional and global powers in the nations natural resources, and how the dynamics between these actors affect identity-based conflicts in the country. Existing tensions between diverse identity groups might be exploited by actors pursuing purely economic interests and who might profit from a violent escalation between identity groups to sustain their activities.

In this context it seems important that as peace practitioners, we continue to ask ourselves what conflicts are really about. Are they primarily about identity or the lack of recognition of specific identity groups? Or are differences of ethnicity, religion and ideologies exacerbated and instrumentalised by actors that stand to profit politically or economically from further polarisation between identity groups?

#### **4. Colonialism**

Colonial legacy and its influence on today's identity-based conflicts was another cross-cutting theme discussed during the conference. For myself, listening to the ways in which colonialism has contributed to the shaping of identities in Southeast Asia, and how its legacy remains one of the root causes of identity-based conflicts in the region today was a new insight.

One example is the divide and rule tactics of the British in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and India that seeded mistrust and fractured relationships between identity groups. Also, the tactic of the French of favouring certain ethnic or religious (often minority) groups, providing them with access to better education and giving them high positions in the colonial administration. In Cambodia, as Huot Thavory, director of the Cambodian peace building organisation, Khmer Ahimsa, commented, Khmers still have feelings of inferiority and mistrust towards the Vietnamese, and that some of those feelings partly stem from the fact that the French colonial administration in Cambodia favoured and promoted ethnic Vietnamese over the Khmer. Another example in this context was raised by Prof Herbert Rosanna from the Philippines: according to Prof Rosanna, today, many Filipinos identify themselves closely with Americans and are culturally very close to them. However, from his personal experience, when Filipinos travel to the US, they often experience feelings of inferiority.

#### **5. With whom do we work as peace builders?**

Initiatives aimed at transforming identity-based conflicts often focus on marginalised minorities, and forget to include majority groups whose discriminatory behaviours and attitudes are often contributing factors to the problem.

Thus, we must also consider the ways in which we deal with majority groups, and how we raise awareness about 'the problem' of identity-based discrimination.

For example, an Indian peace practitioner presented his project that provides education for disadvantaged minorities such as Dalits and Adivasis, with a view at empowering them and offering them more promising prospects for their futures.

Challenges to this work by other experienced peace practitioners from the region, included claims that by working solely "with disadvantaged and isolated identity groups you do nothing about the problem of exclusion that originates from the dominant majority group".

Myanmar was also discussed as a regional example, where the majority of peace process support initiatives cater to (ethnic and religious) minority groups – not taking into account the fears and grievances of majority groups. In many cases majorities (for example Arakanese Buddhists in Arakan state) – who are often politically and economically more powerful – fear that minorities (for example Rohingya Muslims) might become too powerful and eventually become the dominant group. It is important to also address their fears and grievances in working to transform identity-based conflict.

Isaac Khen, a peace builder from Myanmar, mentioned in this context that the democratisation process in his country creates a legitimate framework and path towards sustainable peace. However, he stressed the fact that it is of fundamental importance that this framework needs to create space for the country's identity-based conflicts!

## 6. How to move forward?

Resist generalisations, question rumours and be aware of possible manipulation: Participants agreed that one should not tolerate 'generalisations' about 'the other', and that it is important to be aware of the possible manipulation of religion or ethnicity by political leaders for their respective causes.

Furthermore, participants discussed the danger of rumours. Rumours spread fast, are difficult to control and have the potential to trigger hateful or violent acts between different identity groups. When rumours spread, we should find out where they originate from and question their validity.

Create spaces for individuals from opposing identity groups to meet: Often, one of the reasons for mistrust and fear between different identity groups is, there have never been personal encounters between them. In many cases there is a lack of understanding about who 'the other' is – a fertile ground for stereotypes and rumours. Direct encounters can transform the image about 'the other' and mitigate fixed stereotypes. Participants agreed that safe spaces for such encounters need to be created, and existing safe spaces need to be expanded and prevented from shrinking.

Sports, art, theatre, cultural festivals and youth exchange programs (for example those of Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims) can serve as mechanisms through which safe spaces can be created where divided communities can meet and enter into dialogue (intercultural, interfaith). By focussing on commonalities (what unites us), these forums and events can be a starting point for a change of attitudes vis-à-vis the other identity group and the deconstruction of fixed and irrational narratives (and sometimes even conspiracy theories) about 'the other'.

These processes are lengthy and require patience.

Participants agreed on the importance of follow up-mechanisms for such programs, events and meetings. The challenge is to create multipliers and to follow up on the events.