

Assessing the Impact of NGO Peacebuilding Programs in the South Caucasus: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh

□ CAP Paper 204 (CAAF Fellows Papers), March 2018

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*Yet they keep hoping sometime
things will change, a new
Life will dawn, and fortune’s
smile will beam at long last.*

—Husein Javid

During the four-day escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in April 2016, dozens of peacebuilding activists from Armenia and Azerbaijan posted radical and pro-war statements on social media. Among those who posted pro-war

hate speech were some individuals who had formerly been known as dedicated peace activists. This tendency was highlighted in international media commentary on the escalation, the largest in scale since the 1994 ceasefire: a *Washington Post* op-ed highlighted the nationalist reactions of Armenian peacebuilding activists,¹ while the radical views of former peacebuilders from Azerbaijan were neatly captured in a *EurasiaNet* article.² It is also borne out in my respondents’ comments.

To take one example, on April 6, 2016, an Azerbaijani former peacebuilding activist posted a Facebook statement that read:

Learning about information war strategies with my students...the peacebuilding knowledge that I have learned for years, I now teach them as war propaganda.³

A similar story was unfolding on the Armenian side, where a former peacebuilder posted:

The 5-day war unleashed by Azerbaijan, barbarous in its mentality, against freedom-loving Nagorno-Karabakh demonstrated the triumph of the great spirit of the Armenian people.⁴

As the above narratives illustrate, peacebuilders from both countries may become nationalists, meaning that there are some limitations on the work of peacebuilding organizations. At the same time, however, many activists passed the implicit test by expressing “solidarity for the sake of peace and urging others to remain faithful to the values of building a peaceful future.”⁵ One of my Armenian respondents

shared a personal story about the escalation:

I'm an antimilitarist and a peace-building activist, but during the April War I lost two of my relatives. For those 4 days, I didn't have any information about my brother. So I was in a very difficult situation: on this side was my ideology, which I knew I should follow throughout my life; on the other side were my pain and losses.

In this paper, my primary objective is to identify the strengths and limitations of different peacebuilding programs, specifically dialogue trainings and joint sessions of opposing groups. My findings demonstrate that dialogue programs can help to forge friendships and build empathy, but their limitations include competition instead of cooperation, unequal status in dialogue meetings, and a lack of institutional sanction/support. On the basis of these findings, I elaborate policy recommendations, including—but not limited to—arranging pre-meeting trainings for dialogue participants, establishing alternative online sources of information, and partnering with more diverse groups of locals.

I first present contextual background on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, before reviewing the methodology and discussing the key theoretical underpinnings of the study. The main body of the paper analyzes respondent interviews, and the paper concludes by presenting policy recommendations.

Background of the Conflict

The case discussed in this study,

Nagorno-Karabakh, is a piece of land over which Azerbaijan and Armenia went to war in the early 1990s. This land has symbolic importance for both nations, as it is core to each country's interpretation of history.

Key Drivers

According to International Crisis Group (ICG), the conflict has existed since the end of World War I, but gained momentum after the fall of the Soviet Union, when it developed into war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.⁶ After World War I, Azerbaijan and Armenia collided in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) before the Bolsheviks regained control of the South Caucasus in 1920. Elena Pokalova states that the territory of NK gained the status of an Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) of the Azerbaijan SSR in 1923, but disputes between Azerbaijan and Armenia persisted during Soviet times.⁷ Tabib Huseynov, however, sees these tensions as minor, writing that Armenians and Azeris largely co-existed peacefully in NK during the Soviet era.⁸ However, as the Soviet Union opened up politically in the late 1980s, grievances from the past resurfaced and nationalism revived. The Nagorno-Karabakh regional Soviet passed a resolution in 1988 to be transferred from the Azerbaijan SSR to the Armenian SSR, a move rejected by the Azerbaijani side.⁹ The absence of leadership decisions played a significant role in escalating the conflict from sporadic violence to conventional war.¹⁰ In fact, each side accused the other of starting the violence.¹¹

The crisis turned into full-scale war between independent Azerbaijan and NK in 1991, with the latter enjoying the full support of independent Armenia.¹² Ali Abasov and Haroutiun Khachatryan indicate that the war resulted in tens of thousands of casualties on both sides, the forced resettlement of 250,000 Azeris from Armenia and 400,000 Armenians from Azerbaijan, and the seizure of seven more regions of Azerbaijan, which displaced 800,000 Azerbaijanis,¹³ among them Kurds. Per the ICG Report, Baku insists that Armenia occupied the NK and seven adjacent districts, whereas Yerevan argues that it was creating a "security belt" to protect ethnic Armenians' security and right to self-determination.¹⁴ Each side rejects the claims of the other, and their claims are mutually exclusive, which makes dialogue and understanding very difficult.

Negotiation Process

Negotiations are mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group, established in 1992 and co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States. According to Sabine Freizer, the sides were close to an agreement on two occasions during the Key West talks (in 1997 and 2001), but have been unable to break the deadlock. In 2005, the Minsk Group proposed a new approach, the so-called Madrid Principles,¹⁵ which are based on the "non-use of force," "territorial integrity," and "self-determination."¹⁶ Not only has mediation not produced a peace deal, but tensions along the line of contact have also been

aggravated in recent years, from sniper deployment in 2012 to the escalations of April 2016.¹⁷ Tabib Huseynov argues that strong domestic disapproval in both Armenia and Azerbaijan has played a significant role in the two countries' failure to reach an agreement.¹⁸

Peacebuilding Initiatives

As Abasov and Khachatryan indicate, public diplomacy has been a feature of the NK conflict since the early 1990s, with initiatives such as the Helsinki Citizens Assembly. Between the late 1990s and the mid-2000s, however, peacebuilding initiatives received less support.¹⁹ Along these lines, Ruben Harutunian argues that the capacity of civil society to influence the peace process has always been subject to cycles of opportunity and constraint imposed by internal political developments in Armenia and Azerbaijan.²⁰

When civil society activism revived in the late 2000s, European Union actors were more visible. For example, the European Partnership over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK), a consortium of five different organizations funded by the European Commission, has been actively engaged in public diplomacy since 2010.²¹ An ICG Report claims that peacebuilding NGOs have the potential to prepare publics for peace and increase the accountability of co-chairs, but the two sides' political polarization, their retreat into nationalist rhetoric and military solutions, and (since

2012) Azerbaijan's crackdown on civil society have made public diplomacy efforts increasingly difficult.²² Seemingly, the dehumanization of the enemy makes it more challenging to build relations. Developments since April 2016 offer no alternative to escalation and even full scale-war. It is a "no war-no peace" situation, but lately the conflict seems far from frozen.

Theoretical Underpinnings

To inform my analysis, I borrow from several theories related to peacebuilding and its practices.

What is Peacebuilding?

Peacebuilding is about reconciling adversarial parties by rebuilding relationships. Reconciliation is more than simply signing a peace agreement or conducting negotiations between governments. John P. Lederach defines peacebuilding as "a process made up of a multiplicity of interdependent roles, functions, and activities," including peacebuilding organizations, state agencies, and community engagement.²³ In his book, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures*, Lederach argues that peacebuilding "embraces the challenge of personal transformation, of pursuing awareness, growth and commitment at a personal level."²⁴

Furthermore, according to Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, society-level reconciliation starts with profound cognitive and emotional

change to beliefs, goals, and attitudes at the individual level.²⁵ Individual or personal transformation refers to change that occurs within an individual thanks to face-to-face and interpersonal communication with the opposite side. As Susan Allen puts it,

If key actors and/or enough individuals undergo constructive shifts in their consciousness, such as developing more universal identities or awareness of identity formation, then their commitment and capacity for the peaceful resolution of conflicts, and for resisting mobilization of conflictual identities, will increase and can influence social change in that area.²⁶

One of the methods used by peacebuilding organizations to achieve such micro-level changes is intergroup dialogue workshops. What is intergroup dialogue as a peacebuilding methodology about?

According to Adrienne Dessel and Mary Rogge, *intergroup dialogue* in peacebuilding refers to a facilitated group experience with the following goals: "generous listening, reflection before acting/speaking, openness, sense of trust, commitment to relations, equal conversation power, and mutual recognition."²⁷ The *individual* is at the core of most dialogue-based peacebuilding practices; he/she is the motor of social change and the only true peacemaker, notes Sandrine Lefranc.²⁸ Esra Chuhadar and Bruce Dayton identify dialogue-based peacebuilding programs as process-oriented initiatives, since the priority is to build relationships, trust, empathy, and mutual understanding

among adversaries in order to lay the groundwork for a widely supported peace.²⁹ Face-to-face exchange between individuals in intergroup dialogues enables “positive change in attitude,”³⁰ which can eventually foster “a culture of peace”³¹ at societal level, Helene Pfeil argues.³² How can intergroup dialogues succeed in reducing prejudice and building positive relationships between individuals from two adversarial groups? What are the conditions for the effectiveness of intergroup dialogues?

Gordon W. Allport suggests four positive conditions under which prejudice is reduced and community relations are strengthened in face-to-face and intergroup interactions: equal status of the groups; absence of competition; cooperative interdependence; and support from laws, customs or institutions (authority sanction for the contact).³³ Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp’s meta-analysis of 515 studies clearly indicates that intergroup contact typically reduces intergroup prejudice in the presence of Allport’s four optimal factors.³⁴

Success Stories

The Nansen Dialogue Network is one of the success stories of dialogue-based peacebuilding initiatives. According to Steinar Bryn, the founder of Nansen Dialogue Platform, it began as Nansen Academy in the Balkans in 1996 with a seminar for participants from all the newly-formed Balkan countries.³⁵ By the mid-2000s, there were about 300

participants in these workshops, many of whom later joined civil society agencies, including the Nansen Dialogue Centers. Bryn states that the aim of the workshops was “to understand the causes and consequences of the breakup of Yugoslavia.”³⁶ As Bryn notes, reconciliation was the focus of the Nansen Dialogue Centers between 2000 and 2005, with integration through structural changes in the field of education becoming the focus in 2010–2015.³⁷ Seemingly, individual transformations through dialogue-based peacebuilding trainings in the Nansen Dialogue Network have produced society-level changes.

How did the Nansen Dialogue successfully foment individual transformation and foster a culture of peace in a conflict zone like the Balkans? In this particular case, Ann Kelleher and Kelly Ryan argue, the participants in both groups had “better education for children” as a common goal and mutual need; moreover, “the executive team consists of a Macedonian and an Albanian, who share responsibilities.”³⁸ A common goal and mutual need led to cooperative interdependence, which was supported by equal status. These factors, among others, ensured the success of the Nansen Dialogue Network.

By contrast, dialogue programs between Israelis and Palestinians appear to have had limited impact. According to Helene Pfeil, “major policymaking decisions related to the peace process have been put in the hands of political elites to the point that citizens

keep only a very limited sense of empowerment regarding a possible solution to the long-standing conflict.”³⁹ This implies that the impact of a transformed individual at societal level is weak. Authorities do not sanction the dialogue and participants fall into discourses of violence at home after dialogue meetings.

The Tekali Peace Process is a dialogue initiative between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. According to Onnik Krikorian, the Tekali platform created an opportunity for civil society activists, journalists, and ordinary people from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to dialogue.⁴⁰ Yuri Manvelyan characterizes Tekali as being unique in that—unlike in other projects—no one took the official positions held by the presidents. Speakers’ statements seemed not to target their “opponents” from the other side, but instead mostly focused on their “own people.”⁴¹ This project, however, is no longer active. Why did it not succeed despite equal status, cooperation, and a common goal? It lacked institutional support or authority sanction, and the two governments put pressure on Tekali until they brought the process to a halt. Georgi Vanyan was called a “public enemy” and “an agent” by mainstream media in Armenia.⁴² Similar cases can be observed in Azerbaijan, where some peace activists have been labeled “traitors.”⁴³

Processes of Change

The individual-level changes that intergroup dialogues spur

are indicative of the strength of those dialogues. F. Thomas Pettigrew suggests *intergroup friendship* as a fifth condition for reducing prejudice and building relationships, since friendship creates the potential for repeated contact in a variety of social contexts.⁴⁴ According to Yehuda Amir, “when intimate relations are established, one no longer perceives the other in a stereotyped way but begins to consider him as an individual and discovers areas of similarity.”⁴⁵ According to Jim A. Everett and Diana Onu, most friends have equal status and cooperate to achieve shared goals; friendship is also free of the strict societal and institutional dictates that limit romantic relationships, in particular.⁴⁶

Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp highlight several consequences of friendship: learning about the other; generating affective ties, including empathy;⁴⁷ and promoting trust.⁴⁸ If these individual-level ties fail to develop, dialogue meetings cannot be expected to have a broader impact. Thus, individual-level processes of change are too important to be overlooked. Pettigrew and Tropp tested the relationship between enhanced empathy and intergroup dialogue, finding that the former increases as a result of interactions between two groups, which “allows a concomitant reduction in prejudice.”⁴⁹ Thus, empirical studies look at narratives to learn about perceptions of equal status, common goals, cooperation, institutional support/authority sanction, and friendship. In my

study, respondents spoke at length about the processes of change they had undergone as a result of dialogue, mentioning opportunities to learn about the other and build empathy. Trust was also mentioned in the narratives, but quite implicitly and even dubiously.

Interview Narratives

This paper is built around in-depth interviews with individuals involved in dialogue-based peacebuilding platforms. Twenty-two people were interviewed and gender balance (thirteen men and nine women) was maintained. The average age of respondents is approximately 35. The respondents were selected through the snowball sampling method. Interviews were semi-structured. Seventeen people were interviewed via Skype, while six responded in writing due to time constraints and the difficulty of arranging long-distance conversations. The majority of respondents are participants in dialogue/peacebuilding programs or peace activists, while a minority (four to five) are organizers of peacebuilding initiatives. Most of the respondents preferred to remain anonymous; pseudonyms appropriate to their country of origin are used. When a respondent is quoted for the first time, his or her full name is given; on second reference, only a respondent’s first name is used.

Unequal Status

In the Nansen Dialogue Network, equal status is given as one of the

key conditions for success. Yet in a range of ways, the narratives in this study indicate a lack of equal status in dialogue meetings. One issue is unequal representation at decision-making level, which causes significant discontent among Azerbaijani participants in particular. Mehriban Mutellibova, a peace activist from Azerbaijan, said:

While looking at the regional research projects, you can see that there are experts from Armenia and Georgia doing some work. When you ask why there are no Azerbaijanis, the answer is, “Nobody could be found from Azerbaijan to conduct research.” And when you ask why no expert could be found from Azerbaijan, it seems that they don’t know people in Azerbaijan. Why? Because there are no Azerbaijanis on the executive team. This is a problem with many peacebuilding NGOs in the Caucasus: the core teams are Armenians and Georgians, and as a result peacebuilding works are incomplete. Safety may be a factor, but participants from Azerbaijan can question the dissonance that the organizers are only ever Armenians or Georgians.

Selection Bias

Other factors also have a negative impact on equality. For instance, several respondents mentioned nepotism in the selection of participants—choosing friends or friends of friends—as a serious failing. Zerdusht Hesenzade, a peacebuilding program participant from Azerbaijan, argued that selecting some participants from a pool of candidates and choosing others on the basis of friendship ties creates an intellectual gap. Zara Harutunyan, an anti-militarist from Armenia, also underlined that peacebuilding NGOs should take steps to become more

inclusive, including by welcoming youths who do not speak English (particularly if they do speak Russian, still the lingua franca of the region). “Even if a participant doesn’t speak Russian,” Zara said, “there should be a way to engage them, such as hiring an interpreter to help them work with others.” It seems that some activists currently feel marginalized due to their lack of English language skills; the fact that they mention this as a concern reinforces their commitment to participating in dialogues.

Furthermore, depending on personal experience, respondents were either concerned with the presence of radicals in dialogue meetings or criticized the recruitment of uniformly liberal participants, which they say creates a bubble. “The selection is wrong,” stated Harut Voskanyan, a political scientist and activist from Armenia. “We need to train, communicate, contact, and change more violent people than peaceful guys.” Armenian peacebuilding organizer Karen Mkrtychyan, director of an international peacebuilding NGO, confirmed the importance of having diverse views expressed in meetings. In dialogue initiatives, Karen utilizes an unorthodox approach that gives participants from both sides the opportunity to represent various minority groups—such as feminists, LGBTs, and others—rather than dividing participants along national lines. Gohar Grigoryan, an activist from Armenia, stressed the positive effect of this methodology: “feeling empowered to represent specific

groups is both effective and useful in facilitating discussions during the meetings, helping to change perceptions.” Since participants acknowledge the positive difference this new approach brings, other peacebuilding NGOs should likewise exploit this method.

In my view, it is not a question of creating a numerical balance between, for instance, “liberals” and “nationalists” from both countries so much as it is choosing the right individuals with liberal or nationalist convictions to participate. A lack of rigor in the selection process often means that a participant chosen for their liberal views, for example, is incapable of conversing with nationalists, which is problematic for the success of a dialogue. Along these lines, Zara explained that for people from Azerbaijan and Armenia, a meeting is a venue to impress the third party, to show off that they are peace lovers, when in fact they [Armenians] are the ones who would be most outraged if the Armenian government were to support territorial concessions in the name of peace. She added, “You can see a big difference in the tones or meaning of participants’ Facebook posts in English and in their native language, but the organizers don’t monitor what participants post.” Accordingly, several respondents suggested implementing a background check on candidates as a component of the selection process.

Cultural Insensitivity

Lack of cultural sensitivity in intergroup dialogues was underlined as a characteristic of meetings between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. This lack spurs competition rather than cooperation: insensitive words or actions on the part of a group member create friction between the two sides. Zara stated that most participants in the peacebuilding program see the meetings as a competition to demonstrate that the living conditions and democratic situation in their country are better than on the other side. She added:

There is a lack of self-criticism. Armenians or Azerbaijanis don’t see their own negative sides, and when you are self-critical, the Azerbaijanis think you are a good Armenian, but they [Azerbaijanis] don’t see it as a way to become critical of themselves.

Facilitators’ improper attempts to address culturally sensitive issues in intergroup dialogues is an issue that emerged from several respondents’ narratives. The story of Parvin Bahramoglu, a civil society activist from Azerbaijan, is illuminating:

In a meeting, I saw a female participant from Nagorno-Karabakh who was wearing the flag of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and introduced herself as representing Arstakh [the Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh]. For me, such behavior and such a statement seem provocative. Maybe this isn’t a sensitive matter to the organizers, but they must understand the feelings of both sides.

Gor Sarkisyan from Armenia, a former participant and current peacebuilding program

organizer, gave the impression that Armenians feel the same way. Gor said that during one meeting, the organizers put participants from different countries in the same room, which created problems: “There was a girl from Armenia who had lost her father in the war...but the organizers did not take it into account.” Interestingly, both Parvin and Gor stressed the importance of pre-meeting trainings to prepare participants for the meetings. To quote Parvin, “the organizations act irresponsibly in that they don’t provide a pre-meeting information session for both sides.” According to Elizabeth Paluck, empirical studies show that diversity training before meetings improves awareness of and reduces prejudice against various social groups.⁵⁰ Indeed, organizing pre-meeting sessions is apparently one of the optimal ways to pre-empt culturally sensitive issues. One respondent, a dialogue organizer, said they used to do pre-meeting trainings in Baku and Yerevan, but due to tough political conditions in Azerbaijan, it is now difficult to arrange such activities. Therefore, pre-meeting trainings for Armenians have also been halted in the interests of being fair to both sides. I would suggest that this dilemma could be resolved by holding pre-meeting sessions for Azerbaijanis in Georgia.

Moreover, one of the reasons that culturally sensitive issues come up or are improperly handled is due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of local cultural contexts. John P. Lederach sees people’s cultural knowledge

as fundamental to developing appropriate models for handling these issues.⁵¹ Empirical evidence also demonstrates that an understanding of the local context is a key factor in success, as Ann Kelleher and Kelly Ryan argue in regard to the Nansen Dialogue in the Balkans.⁵² According to my respondents, a lack of understanding of the local context creates fundamental obstacles to the work of peacebuilding NGOs. Gor stated that peacebuilding NGOs lack interest in and knowledge of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh because it is simply too far from Europe and they are now preoccupied with Ukraine. He continued, “Once I and my colleague from Azerbaijan attended a meeting in a European country, where a roving ambassador to the South Caucasus asked, “So, guys, can you travel to each other’s countries [Azerbaijan and Armenia]?”—a sign that the level of knowledge of realities on the ground by external actors can be very limited.

Similarly, Zerdusht suggested that donors’ approach to peacebuilding is wrong because they lack willing and “must hire local advisors [and] work with consultants to do research to identify the issues on the ground.” This narrative indicates the complexity of the problem: disregarding local specificities can negate the positive effects of face-to-face interactions.

*Lack of Authority Sanction/
Institutional Support*

Interviewed respondents,

particularly peacebuilding program organizers, emphasized the role of state policies in distorting interactions. Arzu Geybulla from Azerbaijan, the former co-director of a peacebuilding organization, stated that when participants in cross-border dialogue programs return to their home countries, they are often forced back into their previous mindsets given the reality on the ground. The desire to work together and have a common vision with the other side often prompts aggressive reactions, especially in Azerbaijan. Arzu contended that “the reality is such that peacebuilding initiatives can reach their full potential at grassroots level if only the government lets them work.” Edgar Khachatryan, the director of a peace dialogue NGO in Armenia, stated that those who refuse to follow the “rules of the game” are punished or discredited by the governments or their agencies, such that the actions of civil society actors lose legitimacy in the eyes of the broader public. Dennis Sammut, the director of London-based peacebuilding NGO LINKS (DAR), stated that “peacebuilding initiatives should contribute to changing perceptions and challenging the current war-oriented discourse in both societies.” The extent to which they are able to achieve this, however, is dubious.

Lack of authority sanction influences the selection process, since the organizers became cautious about inviting random people to dialogue meetings. For instance, Adalet Mustafayev, a teacher from Azerbaijan who

participated in the Tekali peace process, mentioned that the lack of trust meant that youths were often excluded from dialogue meetings. It seems that without authority sanction, the impact of peacebuilding work at grassroots or public level will be minimal, demanding unprecedented effort on the part of peacebuilding NGOs to create vertical and parallel interactions. Sabine Freizer argues that bridging the gap between civil society and government could promote synergies by creating the opportunity for non-governmental groups to share the trust, understanding, and common solutions they have identified over years of dialogue in order to help overcome obstacles in official negotiations.⁵³ The narratives have similar tones: Zamira Abbasova from Azerbaijan, former country director of a peacebuilding NGO, argues that such initiatives will enforce the politicization of peacebuilding work. As Arzu summarizes:

This can take shape in various formats, such as track 1.5 initiatives where government representatives are present alongside representatives of civil society during discussions, workshops, conferences, and other similar events. It is also possible to encourage ministry officials to co-author pieces or contribute to a policy paper. Surely, however, this and other attempts must be welcomed on both sides.

Harold Saunders argues that effective dialogue is not a one-

time, sporadic meeting, but rather sitting together repeatedly: “Only in a process of systemic, disciplined and sustained dialogue will they learn to interact peacefully.”⁵⁴ One of the weaknesses of dialogue programs, Amy Hubbard argues, is that due to the short duration of such initiatives, relationships between participants do not have time to develop.⁵⁵ My interlocutors often underlined unsustainability as one of the main issues limiting the effectiveness of peacebuilding projects. Among organizers, Sergey Rumyantsev, a peacebuilding facilitator from Azerbaijan who is currently living in Berlin, agreed that the effectiveness of the programs is connected with continuity: “It is naive to expect a person to change after one meeting; time and investment are needed.”

Participants were even more vociferous. Ketil Shalikashvili, a dialogue participant from Georgia, shared her story:

I have attended some international trainings. After the program was over, we returned to our countries and that was all. I did not see any further cooperation, follow-up activities, joint projects...

Zerdusht argues that short-term projects limit outcomes: “activists are less motivated and lack dedication since they know it will finish after a certain period.” This makes it easier for them to choose other professional opportunities over peacebuilding projects. To quote Sona Nazaryan, a former dialogue participant from Armenia:

I disengaged from taking active part in

conflict resolution activities because they were only on a volunteer basis. At the time, I was busy graduating, and later I had to invest more time and effort in the first steps of my career.

Karen acknowledged that the lack of funding makes it hard to pay staff, who often move on to work for bigger organizations. Parvin suggested that creating an office in Tbilisi would allow activists to remain engaged in dialogue programs; the space could also be used for other projects that would allow peacebuilding teams to make a living.

Another limitation on the sustainability of peacebuilding programs comes from NGOs themselves. Guranda Bursulaia, a Georgian peace activist, argues that there is a regional trend of NGOs changing their course of action:

When peacebuilding was a “trendy” topic in the region, many NGOs claimed that they were working on the issue. Nowadays, for example, gender equality has become more “popular.” Organizations are adapting their aims accordingly; they try to relate their work to new topics. Just doing it [changing] for the sake of grants influences the outcome of projects and NGOs’ impact in the field in general.

Funding

For Reyhan Aghayeva, a peace activist from Azerbaijan, such inconsistencies imply that peacebuilding NGOs lack strategy and dedication to a single area, and are interested in anything for which donors will provide

funding. This brings us to the debate surrounding funding from donors, which is another form of institutional support.

A lack of funding from donors affects sustainability and efficiency. As Andreas explained, it is a challenge to receive funding for a period longer than a year; his organization is currently seeking to extend the duration of funding. Georgi Vanyan, a dialogue organizer and activist from Armenia, was just one of my interlocutors to condemn international donors for cutting financial support for peacebuilding in the region since 2015, especially following the escalation in April 2016.

There are also serious disparities in funding. My research indicated that some organizations have a monopoly: EPNK, a consortium of five organizations, has a budget of €4.7 million (USD\$5.8 million) for 2016-2019,⁵⁶ whereas CRISP, a small organization, received only around €50,000 (USD\$61,000) for 2016 to do trainings in the Caucasus.⁵⁷ Imagine, a middle-tier organization, was granted about USD\$800,000 over the five years between 2012 and 2016.⁵⁸ “Money continues to be given only to a small pool of international NGOs,” Ahmad Faizal, head of Mercy Malaysia, told IRIN News in an interview.⁵⁹ This is likewise an acute problem for peacebuilding projects on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As Guranda explained, “donor organizations which have been around for many years prefer to stay loyal to the local NGOs with which they have experience

collaborating, so it is quite difficult for new organizations to receive a grant for a serious project.” Karen was particularly critical:

The peacebuilding field is monopolized by big London and Washington, DC-based organizations. They want to control the money flow, so funding goes to big organizations, and they don’t want smaller organizations to join their “club.”

The current situation is the fault of donors, who overlook this important issue. The solution is likewise in their hands. Donors should review their funding policies to avoid preferential treatment and ensure that medium-size and small organizations receive their fair share of funding. Such an approach would induce competition, which is likely to improve efficiency. One way for donors to determine which NGOs are worthy of grants would be to observe trainings, which would allow them to compare and contrast the work of these organizations on the ground.

Inefficiency of Follow-Up Projects

My respondents also questioned the quality of follow-up projects. In general, these are not considered particularly efficient.

Some organizers stressed the difficulty of measuring the impact of trainings, while others pointed to the lack of instruments for assessing follow-up initiatives. For their part, activists were openly critical of follow-up

efforts. Mehriban lamented, “The quality of the follow-up projects is not sufficiently high because organizers never care if we need any help; such projects carry only formal importance, to show that something was done on the ground.” There is no continuity, as Adalet mentioned: “We created a website for one project and filled it with some information. Shortly afterwards, it stopped working, yet a report went to the donor that the project was successfully implemented.” For Zerdusht, efficiency is sharply reduced because peacebuilding NGOs work with the same group of people on the ground, and these individuals continue to receive grants regardless of their performance. Zamira echoed this point, noting with frustration that this can lead to the exclusion of youth, even though young people are the future and therefore need to be taken seriously, engaged, and trusted.

Evidently, this group of preferred local partners, often called “gatekeepers,” distorts peace initiatives in many conflict zones. Anderson and Olson argue that this can be prevented if peacebuilding NGOs consult with a diverse range of local experts and activists, which allows them to maintain balance.⁶⁰ It is certainly difficult to cooperate with a broad range of locals when the authorities do not sanction peacebuilding work. Respondents also acknowledged that trust is a factor encouraging peacebuilding NGOs to keep to their own circle of participants or co-partners. As Karen elaborated:

It is mutually beneficial as money flows through one group of organizations and enters the region through gatekeepers. It is done intentionally, I realized later, to kill any other organization, because they see it as a competition instead of cooperation to achieve peace.

Lack of Oversight

Karen was not the only respondent to mention money as a factor. Several other interviewees commented that peacebuilding projects are seen as a business. Zara said that over the past 20 years of conflict, “peacebuilding has become a way of making money.” Apparently, blaming the governments at every turn is a shortcut that allows peacebuilding organizations to avoid criticism without adopting new approaches. According to Severine Autessere, blaming others or justifying one’s own shortcomings is a way for peacebuilding NGOs to maintain prominence or respond to criticism when their actions are having a negative impact.⁶¹ Ilkin Aliyev, a participant from Azerbaijan, argued that peacebuilding NGOs often forget the role of “collective memory” in focusing so heavily on regime type—that is, they overlook the role of “perceptions about the enemy” in both societies. For instance, the 2013 Caucasus Barometer survey shows that 99 percent of Azerbaijanis⁶² and 76 percent of Armenians⁶³ disapprove of doing business with the opposite nationality. As such, it could be said that peacebuilders fail to take a holistic approach to the problem.

Common Goal

My interlocutors’ narratives provided little explicit evidence of a common goal for dialogue meetings among participants from both sides. This is not to say that there is not a common goal, but this does not seem to run deeper than a desire for constructive dialogue and peace. Indeed, some respondents complained that many participants lack even an understanding of “peace.” As such, these individuals need to be trained in the meaning of peace before they can hope to participate constructively in peacebuilding dialogues. The Tekali initiative is a rare example of an initiative that lacked authority sanction yet still managed to get participants to embrace a common goal: cooperation and equality.

It is important to emphasize, however, that all conditions—equal status, common goal, cooperation, and authority sanction—are equally necessary to the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts. If all four conditions can be met simultaneously, a meta-analysis conducted by Pettigrew and Tropp finds, the success of these initiatives is likely.⁶⁴

Processes of Change: Friendship

Friendship can be an important motivator for participation in peacebuilding efforts, as well as driving a broader attitude shift. Gor explained that during one peacebuilding meeting, he made friends with Azerbaijanis. The new friends stayed in touch by continuing to attend peacebuilding programs, which

Gor said motivates him to remain engaged in such projects. He continued:

My two friends from Azerbaijan and I were attending another dialogue meeting between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. The Armenians arrived earlier and were waiting for the Azerbaijanis to come. When the Azerbaijanis came, there was a moment of silence and nobody wanted to shake hands. My friends jumped forward, so we three hugged. After this, other members of the two groups began to greet each other. One Armenian and one Azerbaijani girl joined our friendship network because they thought we were cool. So, in a way, our previous training helped us sort of seduce two more people because of our friendship and great relationship.

This implies that a positive relationship between interacting parties can serve to change perceptions among extended contacts, such as other friends. Indeed, other studies demonstrate that cross-group friendships reduce prejudice among indirect friends.⁶⁵ Aren Melikyan, a journalist and dialogue participant from Armenia, mentioned that he likes to tell his colleagues in Armenia about his work with Azerbaijanis. He said, “I think it helps them not to judge all Azerbaijani people in the same way. This alternative way of thinking can have a good result on the knowledge of the two societies.”

Peacebuilding activists appear to be conscious of their role in transferring positive sentiments toward other groups and reducing prejudice. The physical closeness facilitated by dialogue meetings helps to break stereotypes. This is supported by the fact that “the spill-over effect of intergroup

friendship diminishing prejudice on others is stronger if there are some cultural similarities,”⁶⁶ which provide a baseline for relationship formation. This is borne out in the Caucasian context. Reyhan indicated that Azerbaijanis and Armenians have lots of cultural and mental similarities, which makes building connections easier. Gohar took a similar view:

Our nations are very similar and having lived side by side for so many years we share a lot of similarities, even in our lifestyles and traditions. Involving the two sides in these meetings will help make the anti-enemy process easier.

Research by Davies et al. on intergroup friendship reveals that “time spent together” and “self-disclosure” are the best indicators of intergroup friendship.⁶⁷ In the context of dialogue meetings, organizers can increase time spent together by prioritizing longer-term projects. Self-disclosure may be enhanced through informal story-telling sessions between the groups, an approach that has proved very successful in other conflict contexts. Judith Hoover shows that storytelling has been valuably employed in Northern Ireland through the “Healing Through Remembering” dialogue project, which established ground rules such as “genuine openness to differing points of view, willingness to listen and maintain confidentiality, and responsibility and support for others.”⁶⁸ In the Israel-Palestine conflict, personal story-sharing has replaced bias and lack of awareness with consensus around the need for a non-violent struggle, Silvia Hassouna writes.⁶⁹ For

participants like Aren, who prefers to have more unstructured time and a less formal atmosphere at peacebuilding events, storytelling sessions would be a good choice. In addition, my personal experience is that story-telling is incredibly effective at creating emotional bonds.

Conclusion

Though my respondents see ways in which peacebuilding could be improved, they are universally supportive of communication and dialogue between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. We have seen that it is important to select participants in such a way as to create a sense of equality in the meetings; respondents shared stories of how poor selection processes can distort dialogues. Their narratives also illuminated that intergroup friendship can be used to extend these relationships to non-group friends. They further highlighted the need for institutional support, observing that the lack thereof—and issues with funding, in particular—can cut projects short. If these considerations are taken into account, my interlocutors are hopeful that peacebuilding NGOs can help Armenia and Azerbaijan move toward a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Interview Bias Observations

I found Azerbaijanis more willing to be critical or negative about peacebuilding projects. They were not shy in naming individuals and institutions. Presumably, they felt more comfortable expressing

their views to me, a dialogue partner from Azerbaijan; indeed, one of my Armenian respondents made precisely that point. This is not to discredit Armenians’ optimism, but it may be one reason for a general bias in my findings.

In addition, interviewees who are currently active participants in peacebuilding programs were hesitant to be publicly quoted or to have their thoughts expressed. For instance, one of the participants told me an interesting story, but did not want the details to be mentioned. It is hard to determine whether this is for ethical reasons or due to concerns about damaging relationship with the organizers. Whatever the case may be, this does introduce some bias to the study.

Finally, present or past organizers who had initially been participants in dialogue platforms were generally less critical of peacebuilding projects. That being said, these respondents did tend to criticize trainings organized by institutions other than their own.

Policy Recommendations

In view of the main perspectives expressed in the interview narratives I have collected, the following achievable policy recommendations are proposed.

For peacebuilding NGOs:

1. Retain individuals who have experienced personal transformation as a result of

these trainings, since they are the agents for sustaining relations and making incremental changes.

Three mini-steps are necessary to keep individuals engaged:

- Arrange pre-meeting information sessions or trainings for participants as a way to reduce culturally sensitive encounters. This may involve organizing sessions in Georgia for participants from Azerbaijan.
- Create financial incentives and provide office space, which are necessary tools to maintain activists' motivation and long-term commitment. Organizations implementing these programs must diversify their sources of funding and take a longer-term approach to financial security. They should also report those cases where a lack of funding reduced the effectiveness of programs, as this may stimulate donors to be more generous.
- Organize storytelling sessions during meetings to strengthen the emotional bond between individuals, thus paving the way for intergroup friendships.

2. Increase inclusivity by involving more youths who speak only local languages or Russian. The historical preference of organizers for participants who speak a common language (such as English) is understandable,

as it facilitates communication. However, a broader range of people could be engaged in peacebuilding processes by hiring an interpreter or paying a participant who is fluent in English to translate the discussion into a local language.

3. Increase vertical impact by engaging youth from the regions. Based on my personal experience, I suggest the so-called "Peace Corps" model: Peace Corps volunteers held camps for teenagers in Azerbaijan to train them in gender equality, volunteer service, and leadership. This can be implemented in two phases: following the local camps, teenagers can be taken to Georgia for a joint project. Logistical and political support from embassies would certainly help handle bureaucratic issues, such as permission to camp out. One or two local co-partners with official support can ensure authority sanction.

4. Improve efficiency by breaking peacebuilding NGOs' dependence on a limited number of "gatekeepers." The first step is to find new voices on the ground by hiring consultants or local advisors.

5. Establish an alternative⁷⁰ source of information in local languages,⁷¹ using social media tools and the internet to disseminate objective information about incidents on the border in a timely manner and fight the biased narratives propagated by the mainstream media.

6. Build an initiative similar

to Tekali, with the objective of providing equal status and cooperation in pursuit of a common goal between dialogue partners. Authority sanction is also vital.

7. Arrange tele/videoconferences to keep lines of communication open between physical meetings. Teleconferences are likely to increase participants' commitment to cooperation.⁷²

8. Create an independent evaluation mechanism to assess the efficiency and impact of follow-up projects. To avoid bias, however, an outside evaluator can be hired to observe implementation processes.

For donors:

Ensure fair distribution of financial assistance to guarantee healthy competitiveness between organizations of different sizes. Competition will likely increase the effectiveness and efficiency of work on the ground.

For local governments:

Engage local and international peacebuilding organizations in the official stream of negotiations; let them bridge the gap between the state and the grassroots by transferring information top-down and bottom-up.

List of Interviewees

Adalet Mustafayev (pseud.), teacher and training participant from Azerbaijan.

Andreas Muckenfuss, director of an international NGO from

Germany and an organizer of peacebuilding trainings.

Aren Melikyan, journalist and training participant from Armenia.

Arzu Geybulla, former co-director of a peacebuilding organization and former organizer of peacebuilding trainings from Azerbaijan

Dennis Sammut, director of London-based NGO LINKS (DAR) and organizer of peacebuilding trainings.

Edgar Khachatryan, director of Yerevan-based NGO Peace Dialogue and organizer of peacebuilding trainings.

Georgi Vanyan, director of a peacebuilding organization and organizer of peacebuilding trainings from Armenia.

Gohar Grigoryan (pseud.), anti-militarist activist and training participant from Armenia.

Gor Sarkisyan (pseud.), country coordinator of a peacebuilding organization, organizer of peacebuilding trainings, and former participant from Armenia.

Guranda Bursulaia, activist, participant, and organizer of peacebuilding trainings from Georgia.

Harut Voskanyan, political scientist and training participant from Armenia.

Ilkin Aliyev, activist and training participant from Azerbaijan.

Karen Mkrtchyan (pseud.),

director of an international NGO and organizer of peacebuilding trainings from Armenia.

Keti Shalikashvili (pseud.), activist and training participant from Georgia.

Mehriban Mutellibova (pseud.), activist and training participant from Azerbaijan.

Parvin Bahramoglu, activist and training participant from Azerbaijan.

Reyhan Aghayeva (pseud.), activist and training participant from Azerbaijan.

Sergey Rumyantsev, organizer and facilitator of peacebuilding trainings from Azerbaijan.

Sona Nazaryan, training participant from Armenia.

Zamira Abbasova, former country director of a peacebuilding organization, organizer of peacebuilding trainings, and former participant from Azerbaijan.

Zara Harutunyan, anti-militarist and training participant from Armenia.

Zerdusht Hesenzade (pseud.), activist and training participant from Azerbaijan.

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