

Connecting the peaces



Peace services, in the form of education, mediation, dialogue facilitation, conflict counselling, and psychotherapy, can contribute to the establishment of lasting peace in post-conflict societies, writes JEANNINE SUURMOND.

In essence, a society is created when one person meets another. As humans, we have the capability to really only interact with one person at one time. Even in groups we shift our attention from one person to the next. Billions of such one-on-one interactions give rise to marriages, families, communities, countries, and ultimately, the social world. Clearly, the quality of our interactions lies at the heart of peace. Yet, activities to promote and sustain meaningful connections, even in the midst of conflict (i.e. peacebuilding), continue to receive only small percentages of states' budgets. Nor is it yet standard practice to seek professional support when a relationship is deteriorating and violence looms.

Few of us have been trained in the art and craft of connection. The majority of our exchanges are based on emotional, habitual reactions. Most of us, if not all, have had experiences of being left with feelings of dissatisfaction, loneliness, anger, frustration, or confusion following an argument with someone else; or feeling angry and disappointed when a person did not do what we had expected them to do. Often, we do not even know what we actually need or

want. As a result, we get frustrated. Violent behaviour, including blaming, dehumanising, and punishing ourselves and others, is tragically common in conflicts at all levels of society.

Our ability to forge meaningful, high-quality relations with ourselves, the people around us, and the world at large is what peace services aim to strengthen. Peace education, mediation, dialogue facilitation, conflict counselling, and psychotherapy are examples of such services. They contribute to the healing of relationships and the prevention and reduction of violence by providing direct assistance (e.g. conflict counselling) or indirect assistance (e.g. information provision). In other words, peace services aim to help fulfill peace needs.

Think of peace as an ideal state of well-being, dependent on the satisfaction of various needs, just like health is dependent on adequate nutrition, the absence of viruses, and medical care. Three needs that seem to particularly impact our experience of peace are a strong connection to oneself; healed and harmonious connections with others; and physical

and emotional safety. Having a strong connection to oneself contributes to healing, empowerment, clarity, and psychological resilience to deal with hardship. Through connections with others, we experience inspiration, meaning, joy, harmony, belonging, as well as safety. Positive social relationships can prevent and minimise violence. In this way, peace services can complement the efforts of the justice and security sectors towards violence prevention and reduction.

One characteristic of peace needs is that they become acute when we are stuck in a conflict and suffer the ensuing violence, for example in the case of individual trauma (intra-personal conflict), drawn-out marriage disputes (inter-personal conflict), and rising tensions between community members (intra-group conflict), or nation-states (inter-group conflict).


In these situations, we lose connections with ourselves and/or others. Feelings of disempowerment, frustration, and anger increasingly dictate our thinking and acting. A downward spiral of conflict is set in motion, which, if not halted,

may eventually prompt us to inflict violence on ourselves or others: a “tragic expression of an unmet need,” according to American psychologist Marshall Rosenberg. Trapped in this spiral, some form of external support may help relieve our suffering. Without the right kind of support, our peace needs can continue to fester, widening the gap between us and others. Violence may even escalate—the condition of persons with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder can worsen; spouses may start abusing each other; community members may expel others; and war between nation-states may be declared.

Peace services can help reverse this downward spiral and increase our ability to turn it around the next time we find ourselves in disagreement with someone else. The tool is empathy—a capacity to see what really matters to us and the people who influence our lives. By honestly communicating (for example, with the help of a mediator) what is going on inside us and convincing our enemies that we truly understand and respect their needs and fears, we deescalate the situation. Their desire to attack, as well as their attachment to a particular strategy, will soften. Sensing that their needs are being taken into account, they will have no reason to go to a place of violence. A space for considering strategies that would meet everyone’s needs opens up. Even if we cannot meet their needs, when our enemies receive empathy from us, healing happens. ‘Peaceful collaboration’, the hope expressed in the preamble of Nepal’s Comprehensive Peace Agreement, becomes a real possibility.

While every peace need can be addressed by a peace service, not every peace service can address



The Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction and Local Peace Committees in the districts were created to facilitate conflict mitigation and to act as support systems.  Laxmi Prasad Ngakhusi

every peace need. A high-level mechanism that facilitates dialogue between political parties, like the Nepal Transition to Peace Initiative (NTTP), does not satisfy the needs of victims of war for internal healing. They are more likely to benefit from services such as those offered by psychosocial counselling institutions or a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In Nepal, the significance of peace services delivered through so-called ‘infrastructures for peace’ was recognised by the National Planning Commission in 2013, when it included a programme on strengthening its infrastructures for peace in its 13th Approach Paper (2013-2016). Although their scope is still limited, various peace services are already available. They are offered by infrastructures

for peace such as NTTP, local peace committees, community mediation committees, dialogue facilitator pools, psychosocial counselling institutions, and traditional dialogue practices.

How would our marriages, families, communities, Nepal, or the world look if we indeed scaled up our investments in infrastructures for peace? How would it all look if cultivating our aptitude to stay in connection with one another, especially when the going gets tough, became a priority? Each and every one of us could be creating a peaceful society, one interaction at a time. ■

Ms. Suurmond cooperates as Peacebuilding Advisor with the NGO Pro Public in Kathmandu in the framework of the Civil Peace Service Programme of the German Development Cooperation (ZFD/GIZ).