Building peace through volunteering
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This paper examines the role that international volunteers can play in effecting positive, peaceful change. It documents the results of a research project carried out in collaboration with a large international volunteer placing agency, and is focussed specifically on the impacts of volunteering on conflict affected communities in Bougainville, Timor Leste and Cambodia.

Promoting volunteering as a means to promoting a peaceful world means recognising the crucial role that people to people relationships built over a period of time have in building a culture of peace. It means valuing the intangible effects of building relationship as much as the more obviously tangible and more easily accountable transfer of skills and technical expertise. Professional expertise can be regarded as one facet of the multi-faceted volunteering experience. Volunteers can certainly promote peace through their professional competence but it is often the more hidden skills that volunteers bring with them that contribute to the peace mosaic. Their values, attitudes, knowledge and behaviours can all act as a positive force for good. Recent studies demonstrate the importance of a longer term commitment on the part of the international community to promoting and facilitating longer –term projects and activities (see, for example, Lederach 2005; Spence 2001; White and Cliff 2000). Armstrong (2000) expresses the importance of building relationships with people whose futures are interwoven with ours and in developing inter-country linkages that endure after diplomatic ties have broken down.

Project Aims
The project aimed to explore the ways in which international volunteers contribute to building a culture of peace through their professional practice and through their interactions with the communities with which they lived and worked. The research examined the complex and often hidden relationship between volunteering and peacebuilding and explored through interview and questionnaire:
- returned volunteers' perceptions of their contribution to building peace through their professional practice;
- returned volunteers' perceptions of how they contributed to the promotion of peace at a micro level;
- returned volunteers' perceptions of how they contributed to peace at the macro level; and
- the challenges facing volunteers working in conflict affected communities.

The project was set up after a series of discussions between the international volunteer placing agency and the Centre for Peace Studies at UNE. A letter of invitation to all returned volunteers who had worked in Cambodia, East Timor and Bougainville was sent out. 25 volunteers agreed to participate in the process. All volunteers had been placed for a minimum of six months. Many had spent up to two years in their host country. They had fulfilled a variety of roles from English language teacher, to health professional to carpentry and welding specialists. The data was gathered using three different means – interviews, email correspondence and an online bulletin board. Although there were fewer participants that had been originally hoped for, the information gathered demonstrated that there were many commonalities of experience

for volunteers working in post conflict situations. The paper discusses the re-occurring themes and uses these as a means of suggesting how these particular volunteers built peace as part of their working practice. The report recognizes that these are context and often person specific but the themes do evidence common perceptions and experiences and thus it suggests how international volunteers contribute to building peace.

Volunteers' understandings of peacebuilding: how they felt their work contributed to building a culture of peace.

I believe my work actively contributed towards both building peace and more broadly reconstruction...my work involved developing the democratic processes – eg promoting a constitution, political and party structures, and reconciliation at the sub-district and village level

Volunteers' perception of their role in building peace and their understanding of what this entailed was closely related to their project mandate. Several of the volunteers had jobs specifically related to the reconstruction/peacebuilding process. Their positions varied from Humanitarian Officer to Civilian/ Military Liaison Officer, to Electoral Officer to Co-ordinator of Reconstruction Activities. Their work involved organizing and monitoring post-peace accord elections, conducting audits of community needs in terms of rehabilitation and physical infrastructure reconstruction, facilitating the return of refugees, helping set up reconciliation meetings and accessing funds from other international donors for community driven reconstruction activities. These people were confident that their work was contributing to the peacebuilding process at a macro level. Many of the activities they were involved in had an immediate tangible effect. For example, the process of organising the election in Timor Leste was successfully achieved; the reconciliation meetings in Bougainville were held on an ongoing basis; schools were re-opened and emergency supplies delivered.

For those volunteers who did not have a job designated as peacebuilding, the concept was more complex and nebulous. The concept of peacebuilding unfolded as their job progressed. As their working practice facilitated the empowerment and built the capacity of the communities with which they were working, these volunteers came to an understanding that building peace was about skills training and about facilitating the participation of the local community in activities aimed at securing basic needs and resources.

Peacebuilding - education and peace do go hand in hand. If people can get better education , they are less likely to fall into conflict – get better jobs.

They witnessed how their work had a beneficial effect upon the local community. For example, a disabilities support officer witnessed a growth in confidence amongst colleagues and clients and a willingness to become more involved in activities over a period of time.

I think my presence helped boost the confidence of the staff. Having a foreigner there possibly made the organisation seem more legitimate and more credible (unfortunately) in other Cambodians and expats views. Hopefully some of the training that I provided helped them to carry out their work more effectively.

The people I worked with became more confident to contribute to their community at large by being more a part of rather than being marginalised.

This particular group of volunteers viewed building peace as a micro level activity. Changes at an individual level became indicators that the projects with which they were involved had contributed to restoring confidence and building capacity.

Creating peace at a macro level: Contributing to good governance and sustainable development
Volunteers clearly understood the theory of peacebuilding and how it was interwoven with good governance. They were able to easily identify their work with the tangible aspects of peacebuilding and saw the establishment of the foundations for a democratic society as essential to any peacebuilding activity. All saw the links between building a culture of peace by facilitating and supporting sustainable development processes whilst at the same time ensuring that good governance processes are adhered to.

Satisfying peoples' basic needs – security, food, shelter, land, water – through development assistance, can reduce envy, tension and conflict. Within a society, development assistance and advances in human rights (eg justice, equity, representation, reconciliation) can also contribute to building a culture of peace

The more respect for the institutions of governance within civil society there is and the more respect from government for civil society, the stronger the culture of peace

They viewed themselves as educators and facilitators of this process by providing the skills, training and resources to allow the community to participate in decisions surrounding their own development and resource needs. All recognised and emphasised the importance of indigenous participation in the peacebuilding/development process and saw it as crucial to the long-term success of any project:

We need to drop these persistent colonial attitudes that things don't work unless there's a foreigner/Westerner in charge; that people of other cultures are somehow lesser human beings, and can't be trusted to do what is right for their own people

Development work, applied correctly, should help people believe in themselves, in their own collective wisdom, so as to solve their own problems, identify the needs of the community and to follow ways to achieve their goals. The best development workers are locals who can assist those processes, give some technical input, training; extend the networks so as to draw in resources

For some facilitating local capacity involved working with the colleagues to rebuild the physical infrastructure, build libraries, build a printery so that educational material could be produced. For others it involved contributing to the rebuilding of the educational, agricultural and health sectors. For the reconstruction and humanitarian officers it meant overseeing and co-ordinating the logistics of reconstruction – organising the distribution of food, medical supplies, and agricultural supplies so that peace and reconstruction activities could take place.

Volunteers recognised that they built peace by providing an elicitive training model which led to people becoming more able to participate in the planning and implementation of reconstruction and longer term development activities. One of their main contributions to building good governance was their networking function.

Volunteers acted as networkers, facilitating contact between their communities, local non government organizations and international government and non government organizations. This allowed local communities to access funding mechanisms and monies for the design and implementation of projects aimed at restoring basic services, securing basic needs and creating the conditions for sustainable futures.

I became involved in the community as I made friends. I was often called upon to give advice to communities wishing to rebuild facilities and passed on my experience to them. I often acted on behalf of other communities who were not involved in my program but needed assistance and guided them in the processes for gaining NGO assistance for their own projects.

One of the essential elements of peacebuilding processes is the development of a good system of networking between and across non government organisations and communities initiating programmes for peace. Networking contributes to peacebuilding by creating chains and links of information and contact. It builds relationship in an informal way. The process of networking provides support for the marginalised and vulnerable sectors of society in that it can ensure access to information and resources that might not otherwise come their way. Gilchrist (1998) compares the practice of networking to opening up circuits of power. Networking allows people access to those circuits and reactivates circuits of power that have fallen into disrepair.

Volunteers also viewed themselves as advocates for the communities in which they were working. They provided a voice and a contact point. They actively lobbied the new government on behalf of their colleagues. They also provided witness for their colleagues and the communities in which they were living. One volunteer stated that their presence made the community feel more secure:

They definitely felt much better that I was there - not just to assist in carrying out the work, and encouraging others to do the same, but I think my presence also made them feel a little more secure - as though by having me there, I provided witness, or others would think twice about attacking or looting us

Contributing to building relationships

A clear link was made between peacebuilding and the building of trust and relationship between the volunteer and the community in which and with which they were working.

The experience of living and working with the host community for extended periods of time allowed volunteers to witness how their relationships flourished as trust and confidences were built and, also in some cases, how relationships between parties to the conflict were redefined over time:

I am sure I passed something onto the ex-fighter I worked with. If it wasn't an impression of what Australians are like, it was the friendship formed.

Building peace? Developing relationships between all people - at a micro level within one's own family and circle of friends, within communities, states, and out to the wider world. I particularly enjoy building peace by developing awareness and understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds and watching them discover just how similar they are. Friendships grow from that at a micro and eventually global level. And building peace also means empowering people to feel confident and skilled enough to take over control of their own and their own country's destiny in a compassionate and humanitarian way.

These more intangible processes of peacebuilding were seen as vital to both work and daily living. The experiences of working together as well as sharing meals, sharing transport, collecting water from the local pump were viewed as ways of enhancing relationships, breaking down cultural barriers and demonstrating to the community that volunteers were committed to becoming a part of community life.

At a personal level it was also very satisfying to show people ways of dealing with animosity at an individual level within the workplace, and to watch them discover that it increased people's respect for them, solved the problem, improved their own stress levels, and carried numerous other benefits.

We helped with and contributed to the general running of the home, and sometimes joined in social activities - birthdays, religious events. Initially, we ate separately from the family.. I think humans share many cultural 'ways of doing', but the expression of these differs. The underlying concepts are the same. Finding the common ground was vital, as was "modelling' appropriate behaviours.

Trust and relationships were built through the volunteers willingness to listen when people felt a need to tell the stories of their suffering:– a process that volunteers found challenging but recognised it as beneficial for the people involved.

As a teacher my involvement with the people was more of an emotional nature. At the start the students' stories reflected their memories of the past, especially their running from the Indonesian militia after the referendum vote and heading to the hills.

Challenges of working in conflict affected situations.
Working in a conflict affected situation can be a frustrating and debilitating experience. Recent studies suggest that people coming into a conflict affected situation are often overwhelmed by the violence and its aftermath and have difficulty in adjusting to such a volatile working environment (see, for example, Anderson 1999). The volunteers interviewed were faced with many challenges specific to the post-conflict situation but all found constructive ways of working through them.
What presented as challenges for some were viewed as opportunities for others. Whilst several specifically mentioned the challenges associated with collaborating with other international nongovernment and government organizations, others mentioned that they welcomed such an opportunity and found it beneficial.
The challenges encountered in working alongside other INGO'S were in developing a co-ordinated cohesive approach to the many tasks that were necessary. There was evidence of duplication of resources and projects. Volunteers felt frustrated that they were not able to work more closely for more effective outcomes. There was a feeling

of competitiveness between the various international government organizations. Volunteers felt they should be modelling good practice.

Several volunteers mentioned that other NGO's were driven by the donor dollar and operated to different timeframes.

"In order to keep grants coming in NGO's often have their own agenda, and co-ordinating these agendas in the interests of the needs of the district was a challenging task

One volunteer capitalised on the economically driven agendas of INGO'S as an opportunity to secure on-going funding for their particular organisation:

But when it came to foreign donors/governments/consultants my approach was very much loyal to pursuing the goals of my Khmer organisation. Even, eventually, to the point of manipulating their (often colonialist) attitudes to gain the funds to pursue our Khmer priorities

Securing access to ongoing funding was an ongoing problem for volunteers. Although volunteers were in a better position than their local counterparts to gain funding, many felt that precious hours were wasted chasing the donor dollar; hours that could have been spent more productively. The other theme evidenced in interaction with other INGO's and individual ex-pats was the difference in salaries and the perception that volunteers were inferior that some felt went with this:

The other conflict was working alongside other highly paid expats (usually UN or bigger NGO's with a large expat focus) who because of their huge wages lived a totally different and sometimes luxurious lifestyle. Some of them disregarded the work that "volunteers" were doing both professionally and socially. They could not understand why anyone would choose to volunteer to work in a foreign country. There was definitely an expat social class system.

However, one volunteer recognised that their volunteer status put them in a more privileged position via a vis the host community:

Volunteers...are a completely different sort of expat to those they were once accustomed to – this will help to rebuild trust and reconciliation between Bougainville and Australia in the future

All who came in contact with the peacekeeping forces - the Peace Monitoring Group in Bougainville, UNTAC in Cambodia and INTERFET in East Timor - had difficulties interacting. This had to do with the peacekeeping forces perceived lack of sensitivities to the host community and their overwhelming military presence. Interaction between peacekeeping forces, international non government organisations and the community into which they have intervened is well documented (see for example Spence and Iribarnergaray 2005; Sales 1996; UNRISD 1993 , Spence 1999). The mandates, philosophies, allegiances and structures of military and non military organisations differ and this can present operational difficulties when each is expected to work in tandem with the other.

My greatest cultural challenge was my UN co-workers with whom I lived in quite spartan conditions...many were unqualified, incompetent, irresponsible and uninterested/disinterested in their tasks...most were only interested in their UN pay/allowances, leave and personal comforts – and had no respect for the East Timorese people

I regret that too many personnel were military and male and caused an awful lot of trouble. Some behaved better than others; some had a terrible effect on Cambodian society.

The destruction of basic infrastructure and services as a result of decades of conflict meant that for some volunteers the challenge was coping with having to start from scratch. Building peace was a longer-term task when one had to physically construct one's own working environment before the project could proceed:

I took my tools with me. I had to start building a printing department – had to repair the building, find electricity, put in the power, do everything from scratch.

There were complaints of initial loneliness and a feeling of abandonment. This was largely due to the absence of basic services; there was little access to fax, email, telephone. One volunteer mentioned having to walk for three hours to access an area where their mobile would function. These are issues particularly pertinent to conflict affected situations where the physical infrastructure for facilitating communication will have fallen into disrepair or will have been actively destroyed.

The lack of trained professionals with whom volunteers could work productively was cited as a challenge.. The transferral of knowledge and skills became more time consuming when one was working with communities who had missed out on a generation of schooling and so were coping with literacy and numeracy difficulties. One of the notable effects of conflict is loss in confidence and a reluctance to take on tasks:

In the work place the extremely low or disrupted education and experience of the outside world contributed to low personal confidence and a strong reluctance to take responsibility or show initiative. Inside the government offices there were almost no resources – no electricity, extremely low salaries (about USD 13-20/month – average 15/m) and very low education levels.

Corruption was a perpetual challenge. Volunteers chose either to confront it or turn a blind eye. All the volunteers in Cambodia struggled with the endemic corruption. They felt it interfered with their work, led to tension in the workplace and allowed hierarchies amongst their colleagues to develop.

The ever-present threat of violence was of concern. Apart from having to adhere to curfews, and being vigilant, volunteers felt that the violence affected many aspects of their day to day work. For example, the threat of violence limited travel:

Large parts of the province were off –limits for travel. You just couldn't work in certain areas. Even in town one had to avoid drunk and ill-disciplined soldiers. You learnt quickly to avoid certain areas

As mentioned above, the process of working and building relationships with people affected by violence was confronting.

A lot of people are affected by the crisis, not just physically, but emotionally...being amongst traumatised people can be depressing and quite fatiguing sometimes, as you see your best intentions and efforts foiled

I could live amongst poverty, desperation, marks of cruelty, violence and sorrow yet get on with things. But I knew I could never accept these as anyway normal. A part of me hardened, shut down.

Volunteers had different means of dealing with this distress. For some it meant actively listening to the stories, providing witness as survivors recounted their testimonials of suffering and trauma. For others it meant forging close relationships with families and acting as a support person. Some found solace in keeping busy:

Keeping as busy as possible in responding to the needs was my way of dealing with the emotional demands and stresses.

One particular volunteer responded by documenting the experiences of suffering:

I became acquainted with a number of families who had close relatives murdered by the Indonesian security forces during the period of Indonesian occupation. I am currently attempting to "memorialise" some of these personal tragedies by writing a monograph on the injustices and abuses of that period – lest they be forgotten

Conclusion

The outcomes from this study demonstrate that process of volunteering contributes both directly and indirectly to building peace. It does this through working practice by providing the skills, training and resources needed to assist and enable communities to contribute to reconstruction, rehabilitation and peacebuilding. Volunteering contributes to promoting good governance processes by networking between NGO's, government sectors, community groups and individuals. Volunteers acted as conduits of important information which allowed sectors of society to participate more fully in decisions relating to the rebuilding of governance structures and civil society. The skills that volunteers brought with them plus their outsider status allowed them to move more freely between the various interest groups and discuss issues pertaining to rebuilding governance and civil society. The transferral of skills, of knowledge, of stories, of laughter and tears from one culture to another built peace through building relationships, and restoring trust and confidence. The changes that are made by the volunteer and the host community, no matter how small they may seem to be, create an energy and momentum that transform people's lived experience for the better.

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