Engaging the Role of NGOs in a Conflict Prone Area: Conflict Transformation and Peace Building in Southern Thailand

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Introduction

One of the most devastating legacies of the ongoing violent conflict in Southern Thailand is the polarization of social relationships between the Thai Buddhist and the Malay Muslim communities at the grassroots level. The conditions of human insecurity in the southernmost provinces of the country composed of Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala provinces have contributed to social mistrust and acute social prejudice between the two parties.

One of the key elements of peace-building initiatives in Southern Thailand is the involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Trauma healing, peace education, income generation programs and socio-political participation are all methods that can be employed by NGOs working with the middle and grassroots levels of society to support the creation of a sustainable peace. NGOs, for example, can encourage the Thai government and local people to share initiatives, knowledge and skills to participate together in promoting peace-building initiatives, using a bottom-up approach. With their access to civil society and its authority structures, NGOs have a unique potential to strengthen peace-building.

In cases of deadly conflict it is standard to look at the main actors. Addressing middle and lower levels of the societies involved, with the goal of altering conditions within them, either to facilitate the acceptance of a settlement or even to put pressure on the top level, is a more recent phenomenon. The researcher argues that three main factors in the conflict in Southern Thailand have contributed to its apparent intractability.

First, Ideas around the glorious past and historical grievances of the Pattani Darussalam Kingdom, which was incorporated into Siam, the old name for Thailand, in 1906. With political power subsequently held by the Thai State, native Malay Muslims were increasingly oppressed and discriminated against. The implementation of ‘Thai-ization’ or an assimilation policy, impacted on key areas of local lives such as language, religion and education. The imposition of what was experienced as ‘cultural violence’ by many enabled social prejudice between the native Malay-Muslims and the Thai-Buddhists to rise.

Second, concerns the existence of insurgent groups of Malay-Muslim ethnicity that have been fighting the Thai government by politicizing the issue of *jihad*. This term is used as an instrument to appeal to Malay-Muslims, especially youth, to keep fighting against the Thai government, which is accused of being an oppressor of Islam. Supporters are encouraged to take back the ‘holy land’ of Pattani Darussalam from its occupation by the Thai state, known as *Kafir*.

Third, concerns the idea that the conflict cannot be separated from the development gap in the region. The key issues include poverty, unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, substandard infrastructure, inadequate supplies of land and capital, low living standards, and other problems.

Description of what has been happening in Southern Thailand

Fieldwork conducted by the researcher in 2008 in collaboration with the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, aimed to analyze the root causes of the conflict through a conflict management approach. The resulting thesis was entitled: *Manipulation of Multiple Identities in Ethno-Religious Conflict: the case of the Ethnic Malay in Pattani Muslim Communities in Southern Thailand*. The thesis argued that are three main factors in the conflict in Southern Thailand that have contributed to its apparent intractability.
Objectives of the Study

Following the above findings, the researcher decided to conduct fieldwork focusing on the roles of NGOs in peace-building efforts. This study aims to examine the effectiveness of activities by NGOs and INGOs and to identify obstacles they face.

Conflict Transformation

Conflict Transformation (CT) is a term which for some analysts is a significant step beyond conflict resolution, but which in our view represents its deepest level. It corresponds to the tasks of structural and cultural peace-building (Lederach 1997, 29). The concept of CT is still relatively new. However, it is clear that most current proponents of transformation attempt to set themselves apart from those of more established concepts such as regulation, management and resolution by adopting a more holistic approach to addressing any given conflict. (Lederach 1995).

CT is supposed to encompass all levels of society and includes at least two types of change. First, changes are supposed to be made within the society or societies in which the conflict is occurring, in order to provide the possibility for (second) transforming the conflict into a productive phenomenon rather than attempting to eliminate or 'resolve' it. (Lederach 1997)

The first CT type is Prescriptive Conflict Transformation (PCT) and uses the pyramid model of peace-building, with especial focus on the middle level. With regard to the middle level, Lederach asserts that ‘...the middle range holds the potential for helping to establish a relationship- and skills-based infrastructure for sustaining the peace-building process’ (Lederach 1997, 51). According to Lederach, typical middle-range actors are sectoral leaders, ethnic or religious leaders, academics and other intellectuals, and NGO leaders, although leaders of indigenous NGOs can also be located on the grassroots level.

ECT builds on the idea of Many Peaces and holds that each culture has a system to balance the things that do not run in harmony. Culture for example, stipulates the way in which emotions are expressed, and which

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Track I: Negotiation, Peace-Keeping, Arbitration, Peace Support, Exchange and Threat Power Dominate

Track II: Good Offices, Conciliation, Pure Mediation, Problem-Solving, Integrative and Exchange Power Dominate

Track III: Peace constituencies within the conflict, Building Social Cohesion, Common Ground, Integrative and Exchange Power Dominate

Source: Lederach Pyramid Model of Peace Building (1997)

The researcher also uses the second approach of Elicitive Conflict Transformation (ECT) in relation to healing of personal and interpersonal hurt of children in a culturally sensitive way. The concept of

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emotions are shown and when. This study employed dance therapy as an appropriate, culturally sensitive method to work on healing the traumatic experiences of children.

Both approaches are used to deal with the process of investigation about peace-building efforts that have been conducted by both INGOs and NGOs in Southern Thailand through conflict transformation approaches.

Methodology

The study was carried out over ten months and conducted in two ways. The first involved carrying out fieldwork to collect primary data through a descriptive qualitative method combined with semi-structured in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders. The second involved collecting supportive secondary data. The fieldwork was conducted between November 2009 and March 2010. Five local NGOs were the main target of study; the Asian Resource Foundation (ARF), the Women’s Voices Projects in the Deep-South, the Chumchon Sattha Network, Deep South Watch (DSW), Nong-Chik Hospital, and one INGO, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The contacts built up since the researcher’s early studies in 2008 were very helpful in relation to being able to conduct in-depth interviews and visit remote areas to meet key stakeholders. Purposeful and snowball sampling were applied to identify relevant key informants and cases.

Three categories for the samples applied: a) the NGOs and/or NGO activists that focus on peace-building activities through conflict transformation, and b) local political, community and religious leaders from both Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim communities, who gave their perspectives about the effectiveness of peace-building activities undertaken by NGOs and c) local government officers, who also provided opinions of the peace-building activities of NGOs.

For the ECT approach, dance therapy at Nong-Chik hospital with 15 children was undertaken, constituting a qualitative case study designed through the activity as well as through Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Two forms of data collection were used. The first was the notes made by the researcher who acted as a facilitator during the dance therapy and documented the events. The second was an audio-recorded, semi-structured in-depth group interview conducted by the researcher following the final dance session. (Contact and communication had been built up since 2008 between the researcher and the Nong-Chik Hospital which had a collaborative project with the Women’s Voices Group conducting psycho-social support for children from Yala and Pattani provinces.) The researcher also interviewed three children, who represented the other fifteen participants, to get their deeper feedback about what was happening inside them during the process. Their answers and testimonies provided valuable pointers to issues in regards to the social awareness and social interaction amongst the participants during and after the therapy. The children were of both Malay-Muslim and Thai Buddhist backgrounds and were aged between 7 and 12 years old, or at the mid-development phase.

NGOs and Peace Building Initiatives within the Prescriptive Conflict Transformation Framework

This section describes the work of selected organizations and evaluates how their goals fit into the Pyramid Model of Peace Building suggested by Lederach, in which middle-level actors are supposed to facilitate transformation in both upward and downward directions.

Asian Resource Foundation (ARF)

The Asian Resource Foundation (ARF) focuses its peace-building activities on several aspects around women and children, including peace education, income generation and inter-faith dialogue between Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims as well as Christian religious leaders.

ARF promotes peace education initiatives by providing communities with knowledge about the importance of defending their human rights as human beings and as citizens of the country. By 2010, ARF was working with around 30 villages in the three southernmost provinces and in 12 schools in Pattani, including government and religious Buddhist and Islamic schools. ARF had established a Center for Peace Education and Human Rights in 12 elementary and secondary schools and created a peace education club in each school. The aim was to run “peace” activities in the school, such as sharing knowledge about human rights or conducting enjoyable art activities such as painting, and drawing, and facilitating dialog through movies about cultural diversity.
ARF was also working on income generation programs; for example it had introduced duck farming to widows of the Krue Se Mosque and Tak Bai tragedy. Through a saving mechanism, the women saved around 20 baht per day.

**Women’s Voices Project in the Deep-South**

This local NGO organized a group of women volunteers who were the victims of or were affected by the ongoing conflict, especially widows from the Krue Se Mosque and Tak Bai tragedy. The project aimed to let them speak out and share their stories through a radio program, ‘Women’s Voices in the Deep-South’, which began airing on January 2010. The show also covers general human rights, income generation and other grassroots issues.

**Chumchon Sattha Network**

The Chumchon Sattha Network can be considered a local NGO working on the issue of poverty through participatory development, based on Islamic Development. It adheres to Islamic religious values, within which it works with four main components of Malay Muslim communities: community leaders, Imam (religious leaders), elder leaders, and women and youth group leaders. It works on trainings related to livelihood and housing issues as key ways to respond to human security issues in a conflict zone.

**Deep South Watch (DSW)**

This NGO was established in August 2006. It brings together a network of civil society organizations, media, journalists, educators, public health professionals, and local and national academics working in fields related to peace-building activities. DSW has set up activity for dialog and peace talks amongst all parties. It also works on promoting organizational and human resource development amongst government and NGOs to encourage broad public participation and to raise awareness about the ongoing violence and conflict.

**International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)**

This INGO monitors the treatment of detainees and, when necessary, suggests improvements to conditions of detention to the authorities, after constructive and confidential dialog between ICRC staff and prisoners. The program reaches out to the authorities, local leaders, religious leaders, academic circles and the Thai Red Cross to provide knowledge on humanitarian issues and principles to future political and military leaders as well as decision-makers.

**The Development of Peace Building Initiatives through the Lens of the PCT Approach**

The NGOs in this study were selected for their intensive work helping local communities to cope with the current unsecure situation and finding their own ways to overcome conflict. They are therefore deemed the most likely to have achieved results. Functioning civil society is an important pillar for dealing with human security and human rights issues. There is certain artificiality in the development of civil society institutions, including NGOs in Southern Thailand. From the perspective of the researcher, based on Lederach’s Pyramid Model of Peace Building, Southern Thailand NGOs still lack the power to lobby the Thai government for more peaceful policies. Although contacts with politicians are partially in place, these are often based more on existing personal relationships than on a political-cultural context in which functional lobbying plays a legitimate role.

Contacts upwards to politicians have had limited success and possess further potential. Meanwhile, NGOs are not able to fulfill their role as middle range actors as elaborated by Lederach. Downward contacts to the broader society are more strongly seen. Media coverage of the NGO’s perspectives and activities has helped bridge the gap between the government and grassroots level of society.

Several factors have influenced the development of the NGO sphere in Southern Thailand. Following the violence in Tak Bai and at the Krue Se mosque in 2004, more NGOs and INGOs started working in the area. Obstacles they faced included:

At the start of the NGO involvement there was little consciousness in the broader society of the need for and usefulness of civil society institutions. This led to initial suspicion of NGO employees and their motives. In the beginning phases, NGOs had to fight not only for their existence but also for recognition from most segments of society, including the Thai government. This held up peace-building activities. To some extent this obstacle continues.

A second factor concerned a widespread lack of human, material and financial resources. The latter has
necessarily led to a search for outside training, equipment and funding. This has had a variety of real and potential consequences. On the one hand, it can introduce a potentially positive element of competition into the emerging NGO realm, forcing organizations to attempt to generate high-quality proposals. However, all too often this initial phase encourages a certain amount of parroting of supposed western civic values in order to obtain grant monies, rather than reflecting any actual internalization of such values by locals.

Nonetheless, the developments are not all negative. While reaching few people, the projects have changed the opinions of some, at least privately, including the NGO activists themselves. They are increasing cooperation with various bodies, including the government, on peace-building initiatives.

Activities with children may have the potential to instill different values among the upcoming generation. Any conclusions must be tentative, but at least the principle of ‘do no harm’ is being adhered to, and for relatively small budgets the NGOs and their international partners are doing commendable work, although the impact is still tiny. The hope and belief is that the NGOs are laying the groundwork for a more peaceful approach and ultimately perhaps a productive transformation of the conflict. One possibility for overcoming the still inadequate links with the wider society would be to create stronger ties between existing peace-building NGOs, academics and private sector persons doing humanitarian work on the grassroots level. This could help expand contacts with a broader societal base.

It is appropriate to recall that the PCT concept focuses on the goal to encompass all levels of society and to engender two types of change: in the societies, and in the function of the conflict. With regard to the former goal, some success has been achieved in involving middle-level actors as well as grassroots level of society. As for the second goal, the researcher sees that there has been a shift from seeing third-party intervention, in this case, both NGOs and INGOs, as the primary responsibility of civil society organizations, towards appreciating the role of indigenous peace-builders, such as local leaders as well as religious leaders. Instead of outsiders offering the activity for addressing conflicts in one-shot mediation efforts, the emphasis is on the need to build constituencies and capacity within societies and to learn from domestic cultures how to manage conflict in sustained way over time.

This suggests a multi-track diplomacy model, in which emphasis is placed on the importance of indigenous resources and local actors, the so-called level III, through developing middle level leadership and local and grassroots interests. Conflict transformation needs to operate simultaneously at all levels. The overall aim is to work to prevent the narrowing of political space associated with escalation and to encourage the widening of the political space associated with conflict de-escalation and transformation.

However, the sustainability of peace-building projects in Southern Thailand remains important to protect the existence of civil society living around the conflict zone. Hence, to resolve conflict, what we need is not merely negotiation and military approach but also mutual understanding, respect for the others’ cultural and religious values as well as practicing intercultural communication.

Dance Therapy for Children’s Trauma Healing as a Means to Elicitive Conflict Transformation

Trauma-healing grows out of a commitment to peace that includes health and healing, reconciliation and right relationships, safety and security, justice and material well-being. In situations of conflict and or natural disaster, this means that those who choose to be peace-builders are called upon not only to respond to material needs by sending relief kits and food aid, but also to assist in the psychological, emotional and social recovery of individuals and communities who are experiencing trauma. In this case, the researcher acted as a facilitator of dance therapy and will thus use the word “I” to explain the session.

During my time living in Southern Thailand both in 2008 and from 2009 to 2010, I saw that children have in some cases been specifically targeted in attacks by armed groups. In August 2008, two teenage girls were among eight people shot dead in an attack allegedly carried out by insurgents on a bus carrying Buddhist civilians in Yaha district, Yala province. All eight victims of the attack, including the two girls, were reported to have been shot in the head at point blank range. I can imagine that a tragedy of this sort would deeply affect the children who learn about it, and would not be easily forgotten in their minds and hearts, and could well shape their individual narratives to be constructed around feelings of hatred and social prejudice against ‘the other’. I felt that dance therapy could be a good entry point for promoting better
understanding among children of self and ‘the other.’ It could help children build the self-support required to express emotions locked up inside. I hoped it could bring children into the healing process.

Dance therapy as a medium of trauma-healing is based on the idea that dancing can be an effective way to resolve emotional problems and to keep participants functioning in the ‘here and now’ because it is quite fun and simple, especially for children. Dance is a good medicine because its focus is “I feel” or stillness. The goal is to stimulate connectedness, communion and spiritual experience in children. In my opinion, dance is a good way to express emotional feelings in a creative and culturally sensitive way as well as to communicate directly to the soul. I hoped that inter-cultural dance experiences could help transform feelings of hatred, prejudice, shyness and lack of confidence in children.

When I attended a trauma-healing session for children and widows of Krue Se Mosque conducted by psychologists from Nong Chik Hospital in Pattani province, I was asked to contribute something as a peace builder. It struck me that Gestalt Therapy through dance was a way to contribute. It could help children to have fun, and to surrender and release their inhibitions, blocked emotions, negative feelings and fears. Dance therapy was a form of authentic intercultural communication. It could improve flexibility, self-confidence and respect for human dignity as well as open up the possibility of social contact amongst the participants.

The dance therapy sessions were conducted on two occasions in December 2009 at the hospital. The sessions included a brief meeting with the widows and children of victims of the Krue Se Mosque and the Tak Bai tragedy. At the first session, only Thai Buddhist children were invited to participate while Malay Muslim children were observers and their responses were noted. It was surprising to see the positive response from both sides. I then decided to conduct a second session two weeks later involving all of them together, which included about twenty children.

During the dance therapy, participants engaged in physical contact by holding hands or linking arms. Since the arms were held close to the body, dancers were close to one another. Engagement in physical contact created both social awareness and interaction. Initially participants appeared uncomfortable when physical contact was introduced but they responded with humor and lightheartedness to lighten the tension.

Participants later identified that the limitations of the dance style allowed them to focus more on interactional factors. The combination of expressive and limited movement structures may have contributed to the social bonding of the group. There was no pressure on the participants. The non-competitive nature of the sessions enhanced learning. The children appeared to move through several stages of group development. This was evident in their identification of how doing the same thing enhanced their learning experience and enhanced social connection. Their willingness to participate in a shared task was important. They said that they would miss each other when the session ended. Such an acknowledgement meant a certain level of trust, understanding, awareness and intimacy.

It was interesting that participants were invested in learning and practicing both as individuals and as a group. Over the session they maintained a balance of focusing on learning the dance and engaging in intimate social interaction, including transferring positive energy and making eye contact. Laughter was common throughout the session. From my observation, I saw a process of intimacy build up among the participants. This happened where after recognizing differences, they began to accept the differences. Participants were then willing to support individual needs and boundaries through becoming more open, supportive, and trusting of each other. (Touching is a process of nurturing, and increases group involvement, perceptions of boundaries, and feelings of closeness. Synchrony between the rhythm and the movement often develops into spatial synchrony in which participants move together in time, helping to develop communication and relationships, activating expression, fostering contact, and promoting group cohesion.)

The experience suggested that the children were more motivated to communicate afterwards, and hopefully this will be a continuing fact in their lives. I therefore consider that it is useful to promote the social benefit of dance amongst children in the South. It can be used as a means of trauma-healing that is very important to open the possibility of intercultural communication amongst children.
Activities carried out during the dance therapy session with children from the Thai-Buddhist community at Nong-Chik Hospital of Southern Thailand

The session of dancing therapy lasted for about 2.5 hours. In this picture we can see that participants engaged in physical contact and laughter, building social interaction.

A Nong Chik psychologist helped me to explain the dance movements to a child. All of the children are speaking in the Thai language because they are Thai Buddhists.

This picture shows about fifteen children from the Thai-Buddhist community in Yala province attending a session of gestalt therapy through dance on December 20th, 2009. Most of them are young boys. They were enthusiastic in paying attention to the example I gave in relation to the rules and movements of the dance.

All photos were taken at Nong Chik hospital on December 20th, 2009 by the researcher.
Conclusions and Recommendations

The impact of NGOs and INGOs depends on the expertise and knowledge of their local partners to identify and meet the needs of the beneficiary communities. At the field level, the complex realities mean that INGOs and NGOs can only effectively implement programs with the knowledge and connections of local partners, such as local community leaders, religious leaders, women’s groups, youth and so on. Such strategies open up space for conflict transformation approaches. Furthermore, they give local people an opportunity to work on their own initiatives and implement their own culture to guide local and international partners. In a few cases the involvement of local people is still limited. It is quite difficult for NGOs to resolve issues of lack of trust among local people. NGOs also lack the funding to implement long-term projects and they face difficulties reaching the remote areas or ‘red zones.’

This research revealed a multifaceted situation on the ground, in which some local NGOs such as ARF and Chumchon Sattha have developed into strong and independent organizations able to set their own parameters for the kind of peace they want to build. Yet, in general, the limited success by NGOs in reaching the grassroots level runs contrary to some of the existing theory on conflict transformation, which assumes that NGOs are well connected at the mass societal level. Furthermore, there is a shortage of NGOs and INGOs working on peace education. More are needed, especially those that cater for children. Such initiatives could be an entry point to involve as many local people as possible to get involved in peace-building activities in which NGOs can help bridge the gap between the government and local people.

The following recommendations are made:

- “Enhance the role of local NGOs and civil society, particularly community and religious leaders, by enriching and improving their knowledge and skills for setting disputes. Do this by developing religious values, such as underscoring the concepts of non-violence and compassion in Theravada Buddhism and the concept of rahma (mercy or compassion) in Islamic values.”

- “Promote and support educational arrangements created by local people and encourage the participation of local communities in public and private educational establishments. Local NGOs along with public and private schools may jointly design the curricula for certain subjects, e.g. on peace and cultural diversity.

- “Designate the deep south as an area of high priority in the government’s poverty alleviation policies, in collaboration with local and international NGOs that use participatory approaches. Include capacity building and training for religious and community leaders to improve the community’s skills and knowledge of peace, and offer income generation programs.”

- “To deal with trauma-healing, especially for children and women, dance therapy such as the kind engaged with among children at Nong Chik Hospital could be applied, along with painting, drawing and other art forms. NGOs can play a positive and critical role in this area that the state will never be able or willing to play.”

ENDNOTES

1 The term peace-building can be used to describe a varied set of activities or programs, the manner that these programs are implemented as well as their potential outcomes. It refers to efforts undertaken at different levels of intervention and implemented by different actors (Lewer, 1999, 12).

2 *Jihad* is a Qur’anic concept. It refers to exerting efforts, in the form of struggle against or resistance to something, for the sake of Allah. This effort can be fighting against armed aggression, but can also be resisting evil drives and desires in one’s self (The Islamic Qur’an)

3 The word *Kafir* has been used in the Qur’an for rejecter of the faith [verses 1-3-4-5]. It is further explained that whosoever does not believe in Allah together with all His attributes, conceals the Ultimate truth about *Tawheed* (oneness of God), declines to have faith in it and fails to obey the instructions of Allah, has committed ‘*Kufr*’ and thus, he is nothing but a ‘*Kafir*’. (The Islamic Qur’an)

4 This concept is strongly inspired by UNESCO’s famous Manifesto 2000, which proposed to turn the new millennium into a new beginning, an opportunity to change, all together, the culture of war and violence into a culture of peace and non-violence. The six cornerstones of the Manifesto 2000 are:
   - Respect the life and dignity of each human being
   - Practice active non-violence
   - Share time and material resources
   - Defend freedom of expression and cultural diversity
   - Responsible consumer behavior

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- New forms of solidarity. (Innsbruck University, Peace Studies Program, 2000)

5 On October 25th, 2004, 3000 people gathered in front of the provincial police station in Tak Bai district, Narathiwat, demanding that the authorities grant bail to six Malay Muslims who were members of a village security unit. Officials used force to break up the crowd, resulting in six deaths at the scene. About 1,300 people were arrested. During transportation of the prisoners to Inayuth Boriharn Fort in Pattani, 79 suffocated to death from being stacked one on top of one another for an extended period. (Report of the National Reconciliation Commission, 2006)

6 The key concept of this therapy is to develop an understanding, including evaluating children’s contact level, and helping them to identify and express emotions to help them focus on their presence, here and now, and to explore the treatment of these children. Through the awareness and experience of different options of being, humans gain the freedom of choice. In such a way, change happens naturally. Awareness therefore is the goal and path of Gestalt therapy. (Jarosewitsch, 1995, p.1)

REFERENCES


