VNG International

ORGANISATIE VOOR INTERNATIONALE
SAMENWERKING VAN DE VERENIGING
VAN NEDERLANDSE GEMEENTEN

INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION
AGENCY OF THE ASSOCIATION OF
NETHERLANDS MUNICIPALITIES

SCHOKLAND NETWORK FOR PEACE, SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP ON LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Report of the Zones of Peace meeting

June 2008

VNG International

IKV PAX CHRISTI

This article has been produced by Dion van den Berg of IKV Pax Christi and Arne Musch of VNG International. It is the first product of the working group on local governance of the Network for Peace, Security and Development, a network that was developed within the framework of the Schokland MDG Agreements.

1.   ZONES OF PEACE

> *Why are no shots fired in Tuzla (in Bosnia-Herzegovina) while violence and ethnic cleansing takes place around it?*
>
> *Why can people safely exchange goods in one market in the Moluccas (in Indonesia) while they get caught in Christian-Muslim riots in another?*
>
> *How could the handing out of arms to local militia in Anbar (in Iraq) reduce violence there?*
>
> *How can groups of unarmed citizens in Cauca (in Colombia) resist heavily-armed groups?*

These questions point to examples of Zones of Peace: areas that are less violent than their surroundings. Areas where local communities provide a basic level of security and safety, often but not always with support of local goverments, often but not always without outside support.

Zones of Peace are relevant. Their local security impact is important in itself but there is more. They set examples for others. In some cases, they also had an influence on the national level by promoting negotiations between warring groups. More abstractly, Zones of Peace may show that negative peace (stopping the violence) can be created locally. The current thinking generally is that local contributions are mostly relevant to positive peace (a situation of lasting stability, social justice, impartial enforcement of law, fair distribution of power and resources, etc..)

Local communities undertake a variety of initiatives to avoid escalation of conflict and to fight external or internal threats of violence. Sometimes, the threats are met with non-violent means, but in some cases they form their own armed guards or vigilance committees.

2.   THE ZONES OF PEACE MEETING

On Tuesday 10 June and Wednesday 11 June 2008, at the City Hall in The Hague (the Netherlands), a meeting was organized by IKV Pax Christi and VNG International. This meeting is part of the programme 'Strengthening local government capacity for peace building and reconstruction in fragile states', developed under the so-called Schokland network initiative for peace, security and development.

Chaired by Mr. Nico Schoof, mayor of Alphen aan den Rijn (the Netherlands), 22 people from Iraq, the Moluccas (Indonesia), Colombia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Netherlands met. These included local government representatives as well as civil society organizations' representatives.

The participants knew little about each other's conflict region, so first of all basic introductions on the conflicts were given. Following this, the participants shared their experiences with Zones of Peace in their region and tried to point out what factors made their Zone of Peace a success. Furthermore, the role of local government support and outside support, if there was any, was analysed.

Participants face danger on a daily basis. They were promised that nothing they said in the meeting will be reported in ways that can be traced to them individually. This report is therefore less specific than it could have been.

3. SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE CASES

Iraq

Foreign occupying orces thought, after the liberation, that the Iraqi people could themselves address issues of security, but reliance on successive national governments resulted in only a weak grip on both national and local security problems. This is mainly because local, traditional tribal structures are more important for the citizens than western-style representative structures including the national government. Compounding the problem is that political developments in other countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United States of America have real local consequences in Iraq.

So while sustainable solutions can only come about with outside support, there are two examples where the violence has been kept out or brought under control: Iraqi Kurdistan and the 'awakening councils' of Anbar and, later, its adjacent provinces.

Iraqi Kurdistan enjoys a certain level of self-rule since 1991. An important factor is that its various resistance movements are now connected to both the regional government and local ones. They command considerable military force, represent an overwhelming majority, and work together towards more autonomy. (So much so that despite the now federal structure of Iraq, many still think that the Kurds strive towards its desintegration). This explains why Iraqi Kurdistan could become a Zone of Peace. Despite obvious political tension, there is little violence. The clearest consequence of this is that Iraqi Kurdistan attracts migrants from other parts of the country.

The 'awakening councils' are a more complex case. In Anbar, one of Iraq's most violent areas, indeed dialogue was established by and between tribal leaders who have the power to guide people to either war or peace. It took place in a political environment of disgust with the indiscriminate killing of people by groups affiliated with Al Qaeda. Together with religious leaders, the tribal leaders created these councils, which also have access to armed movements. They helped reverse the escalation of violence.

Interestingly, local governments played a role in creating the networks of leaders at the start when it was still a very dangerous initiative – as intermediaries between tribal leaders and occupying forces.

The local governments are however not the dominant actors, and they only started playing this role after citizens made clear they'd support such initiatives. Once the councils quenched the violence, it made both the the representatives of the national government and the local governments stronger. Some international organisations, such as USAID, provided assistance by means of training programs on conflict mitigation.

Colombia

In Colombia, the conflict is dragging on for already 40 years. The conflict of the left-wing guerrilla groups started as a ideological fight for land reforms, political participation and social-economic equality. The conflict became much more violent after the surge of the right-wing paramilitary groups in the late 1980s. In the nineties, the conflict transformed completely as the guerrilla and paramilitary groups got involved in drugs trafficking, kidnapping and extortion practices.

Communities got stuck in between guerrilla, paramilitary and government forces, as they accuse the population of collaborating with their enemy. In some regions, the paramilitary groups terrorized the rural population and forced them to leave, after which the land was confiscated.

During the last three years, the paramilitary AUC was demobilized. The national government is looking for a military solution of the conflict with the remaining guerrilla forces FARC and ELN. Mayors and other democratic representatives are not allowed to maintain a dialogue with the illegal armed groups. Not even for humanitarian issues such as the creation of safe havens and the liberation of kidnapped persons. This situation has a very negative impact on the local security situation and the position of the mayors in conflict areas.

The indigenous communities of northern Cauca live mainly in reserves. The fact that the government has not yet handed over all the land that was promised to them in bilateral agreements, is still causing social tensions. The indigenous communities gained legal recognition for their traditional local governmental structures, and have developed rather strong local social structures. These indigenous councils work together with the mayors and councils in peace building issues and social cohesion. Together they have organised big meetings, with up to 10,000 or 20,000 people, to consult with the citizens and mobilise support for peace initiatives – putting political pressure on both the FARC and the army. In Colombia, it was possible to mobilise a lot of people without the help of the government.

The peace initiatives among indigenous people in Colombia have always strongly relied on trying to take away the legitimacy of violence. This is very important for civilians, because they are the most affected by the armed conflict. In northern Cauca, the mayors and leaders revitalized the traditional institute of the 'indigenous guard' in order to work on the human security of the population. The guards are unarmed and received training on human rights issues. It is certainly not a police force; the governmental police and military forces are active in the area and have legal jurisdiction to detain people.

The indigenous guard is permanently monitoring the security situation in the reserves. Despite of the governmental prohibition to dialogue with armed groups, they do discuss the violations with the guerrilla and negotiate with them on humanitarian issues. In case of emergency conflict situations, the unarmed civilians are concentrated by the guards in special zones, marked by flags of international organisations, where no fighting was allowed to take place. Finally, the guards focus on the prevention

of the recruitment of youngsters by armed parties training and talk with the indigenous families on the cultivation of illegal crops and environmental issues.

This has in particular been a very strong process among indigenous people. Leaders in the community seek political solutions for the problems: they organise demonstrations and try to lobby for humanitarian agreements.

The conflict in Colombia is very much about social injustice, so any solution will need to see the even distribution of resources and wealth among all groups. At present, the reintegation of demobilisied soldiers and fighters is a priority.

The situation in Colombia, for a very long time, was also determined in other states, in particular in the United States of America and the Soviet Union. The US position cannot not be ignored, and the support of neighbouring countries will also be needed to reach a sustainable solution.

Bosnia and Herzegovina
In Bosnia and Herzegovina, war raged from Spring 1992 to December 1995. When the conflict started, the army (JNA, Yugoslav National Army) was not protecting, and at some point even attacking the people. When the ethnic cleansing started, the mayor of multi-cultural and multi-ethnic Tuzla did not get proper responses from the national government when he asked for political initiatives and protection for the citizens. He concluded it was high time to take leadership and do something himself. First of all, he was in mutual consultation with the city assembly. At the same time, he requested the chief of police for co-operation in order to protect the citizens; given the fact that the JNA was one of the warring parties, the police was the first to take the lead in organisation of the defense of the city. Officers leaving the JNA would join forces and form the backbone of what would develop into the ABiH (Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Unfortunately there was hardly any communication with mayors of other towns, because all of them were confused, and the national government was clearly not in control. The media informed the citizens about cleansing of Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and Croats from other towns. Yet in Tuzla, all people primarily remained *Tuzla* people. The city assembly and the mayor decided to establish Civil Protection Units, organising citizens to protect buildings etc.

The mayor also stayed in touch with the media, the police, and the Yugoslav army commanders. In the beginning of the war they were still in the barracks in Tuzla city; the mayor negotiated their peaceful departure from the city – thus avoiding fighting with the army in the street of Tuzla (in itself an achievement, because departure of JNA forces in other cities had not passed without bloodshed. He was truly aiming to protect individual citizens and their properties, regardless of their ethnic background.

For Tuzla, it was crucial that two religious leader supported the concept of citizenship. This was remarkable, because at the same time many of their believers expected a different position, favoring their own ethnic and religious group.

When it was almost impossible to travel to and from Tuzla, the local council and the mayor decided to set up a department for international co-operation. They understood the importance of getting the news on what was happening in Tuzla to the outside world, to other parts in BiH, to neighbouring countries, to the EU states and the USA.

In Bosnia, (international) partnerships were very important. For example, Forum of Tuzla Citizens linked both with international and local partners to build an ideology of a better future. In 1994, contacts were established with among other IKV and hCa (Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, a pan-European peace and human rights network). These international supporters did not come to tell actors in Tuzla what to do, they came to listen and understand the situation, and then had long discussions on equal footing.

Important programs were developed this way, among other the ABC program (Assistance to Bosnian Communities), that involved co-operation at all possible levels, focused at visible results while at the same time adressing underlying problems. The model of international partnership with cities and CSOs from abroad was very successful. The Tuzla Local Democracy Agency, initiated by the city of Bologna, was important as well. Even during the war, in 1994 and 1995, three big international conferences were organised in Tuzla with the support of the foreign partners – the biggest one a four-day conference in October 1995, with over 500 participants from all over Europe, USA, Canada and other countries from all continents.

Ever since the war, the forum of Tuzla citizens is a strong promoter of truth-finding and lobbies for return of *all* citizens to their pre-war home towns. Further, it is important that today's people in power do not forget how it was when they were a minority group. They have to understand dat politics should not be based on ethnicity but on a political program. Unfortunately, up to today most NGOs and CSOs are ethnically based.

Regarding the economy, in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina some interesting municipality-supported projects included setting up incubator facilities (providing small starting businesses with joint space and facilities, for displaced persons and others) and provide them with small investments. Such initiatives, when dealt with properly, had a strong peacebuilding impact (Gradacac, Modrica).

The international community did not have a clear policy on the Bosnian war. If such a strategy would have been in place, the war could have been stopped faster. At present, the perspective of EU membership is absolutely a stabilising factor. But politicians and citizens do not understand that regional co-operation is equally important for BiH. Despite of all criticism on the international community, their over-all role since 1995 has been a useful one.

Moluccas (Indonesia)
In the Moluccas (island group, part of Indonesia), the conflicts violently escalated in 1999, involving both Christian and Muslim communities. People trusted the government and police to protect them. The local governments did take some initiatives, but these were too formal and ceremonial; it remained empty gestures, also because the village leaders did not co-operate and kept all info for themselves.

Then, the authorities segregated the two communities, thinking this would simplify the situation. At first it worked, but then the army and the police became opposing forces themselves. This resulted in different security sectors and people being forced to work in one region or the other. It paralised the local governments. At that time, only the governor's office was still neutral and safe. Meetings were held in the office of the governor, in order to prevent further escalation.

The peace process started upon the basis of an economic need, and a need for local resources. For example, Christians would have vegetables and Muslims fish. Areas were localised that were used by local civilians to exchange goods. This Peace Market is called a Baku Bae Peace Zone. Violence could be elsewhere, but not here on the market. Local government members and some soldiers secured the safety of the market. Now trust between the groups could be strengthened, at first secretly, so as not to increase the violence between the groups. Indeed, initially no publicity was generated. Later, connections were established with trusted members of the army and the local government. Finally it became a model for other areas, so that people can meet there in peace. The economy is very important in the Moluccas.

Before the conflict escalated in 1999, there were some 30 NGOs in the Moluccas. After the conflict, with all international support coming in, that number rose to approximately 400! Unfortunately, one few of them have real output, many are involved in NGO work just to make some money. The situation became better again after the tsunami, when many donors shifting their attention to the regions heavily affected by the tsunami. Only then again, did reconciliation come back to the agenda and did people understand that they had to become active themselves. "Especially in the US, the interest is directly related to the war or big humanitarian disasters. With war, the interest will evade very fast..."

Yet, just receiving money does not help. When donors just give money to certain initiatives, this can also lead to new and more problems (corruption, jealousy, apathy, fights over resources, lack of citizens empowerment); it may thus lead to less rather than more co-operation among people and communities.

Nevertheless, support in global networking will help to maintain peace and to develop our economy. For example, there is a cooperation between business and non-business organisations, preventing people from fighting, and putting back money into development schemes. More co-operation also means more protection. At the same time, important resources (such as the oil and gas found in the Moluccas) can make a peace very fragile. Despite of the globalisation, the economic development of the Moluccas can only be built upon the basis of sustainable economic activities on the islands themselves. Economic Development Programs preferably have a clustered approach, combining local, national and international actors.

The media played a rather negative role during the conflict, and therefore various initiatives were set up to provide the citizens with more objective information.
Altogether the local leadership was quite strong, strong enough to withstand the outside pressure. The local leaders asked the people, both Christians and Muslims, from other parts of Indonesia and who played a disturbing and destabilising role, to leave. The local leaders also started local disarmament campaigns, as a confidence-building measure.

4. GENERAL FINDINGS AND PROVISIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings and recommendations are listed in this section of the report in a pretty general way, in order to protect the participants.

About the peace initiative:

- **citizenship is the basis**

  In the development of the conflict, individual's identities are being reshaped, voluntarily or forced, by (over-)emphasizing differences. People allow their (human) identity to be taken away, and instead only perceive themselves and others as part of a (religious or ethnic) group. Yet, in all the cases presented the principle of citizenship was the basis of action, *not* the differences between groups.

- **Co-operation is crucial**

  In all cases presented, there is or was co-operation between citizens, civil society organizations and/or (local) governments. You cannot form a Zone of Peace just by yourself. In some cases, the local government took the initiative. In other cases, the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) took the lead. Yet, in all cases co-operation was developed.

- **Citizens can make the difference**

  The level, quality and visibility of citizens' involvement in Zones of Peace programs is very important. Such programs have to be an effort of the local community at large. It helps citizens to develop a strong sense of ownership of local peacebuilding initiatives.

About the activities:

- **Providing means of existence**

  A longing for wealth is a major cause of instability in the regions present. Providing of means of existence can be a powerful peacebuilding activity.

- **All citizens must benefit from economic development**

  Economic development can be a motor for sustainable peacebuilding, but it can also create or re-create social injustice. Economic development therefore has to be organised so that *all* citizens can benefit from the development, otherwise it will not be sustainable. Alternative models of economic development must be developed, upon the basis of solidarity (especially where social injustice was a root cause for the war).

- **Common interests as basis for co-operation**

  The Baku Bae Peace Market is a very interesting example of how an exchange system was developed as a peacebuilding tool. It would be interesting to see if this could be developed in other contexts as well.

- **Planning publicity at the proper moment**

  The Baku Bae Peace Market developed silently, which allowed it to grow. In other cases the media attention was crucial. Initiatives need time to develop and seek media attention at the right time; should not be prematurely publicised.

- **Use local media for disseminating objective information**

  In Tuzla, on the other hand, the use of local media was extremely important in providing reliable information to the citizens. The access to this information helped citizens to withstand nationalist propaganda. Often, citizens do not automatically analyse news in an objective way. Organising channels to disseminate objective information is then very important.

- **Support women**

  The role of women is very important: quite often they are victims, and at the same time, they are very often also at the frontline of the civic initiatives, and that has to be supported.

- **Incorporate the regional dimension of conflict**

  The influence from the region (neighbouring countries) is often huge and need to be analysed carefully. In some cases, the initiators of Zones of Peace have set up impressive and constructive working contacts with similar initiatives in the neighbouring countries).

- **Provide human rights training**

  It is very positive to train people, even indigenous guards, with regards to human rights instead of in the use of weapons. Human rights training enhance the self-confidence of citizens, sends a strond political signal, and prepares the local community for the post-conflict period.

- **Provide temporary safe places**

  The concept of safe places where you can raise a flag and where citizens will not be attacked (as in Colombia), is very interesting. Yet, in other cases it might have the opposite effect.

- **Work with young people**

  It is necessary to work with young people. Hereby you can give them perspective, which makes it harder for the army or armed groups to mobilize them.

- **Build knowledge and capacity to deal with conflicts**

  Dealing with conflicts, especially in times of violent conflict, is difficult. Therefore, an continuous process of promoting and enhancing conflict transformation knowledge and capacity is needed.

About outside support

- **Local ownership**

  As a rule, Zones of Peace start from the inside, as with the Baku Bae Peace Market, the activities of the mayor of Tuzla, and even the awakening councils in Iraq (although some international media still seem to believe that people are willing to support such dangerous initiatives because outsiders tell them to). In a second phase, connections with other organisations and/or the international community are established. Outside support can be very important (see below), but no way should outside support overrule the local ownerhip of Zone of Peace activities and programs.

- **Long-term commitment**

  Zone of Peace initiatives are best served with a long-term commitment from the part of outside supporters. Sustainable partnership will lead to the best results.

- **The relevance of the moral support**

  Moral support is a very important, sometimes underestimated component of international support for Zones of Peace. It encourages the Peace of Zone initiators and may also provide their work with more credibility and authority. International participation in public events has an impact.

- **Individuals rather than organisations**

  Trust is the basis for co-operation. Workshop participants underlined the importance of the connection and co-operation with certain individuals who have shown their commitment to the cause of the Zone of Peace. Such partnerships with individuals is considered even more important than the link to the organisation behind these people.

- **Too much money is not good**

  Donor organizations have made major mistakes. Yet, support from the international community can be and is very important *if* it shows solidarity in the most difficult times. Then it will encourage people to move on, try again, to go on. That is much more important than money.

And especially the idea of creating peace by giving a lot of money for a short period of time, is not helpful. However, clever support over a longer period, with equal partnership, can be a real support for local actors to be a real promoter of peace.

About influence on the national and international level
- **Keep open dialogue with the national government**
  Various cases show that an open dialogue with the national government is important, to present demands and to show that the local community is united and has a clear alternative ideology.
- **International community can enhance political relevance of Zones of Peace**
  Good examples and best practices can have a certain political impact at the national level, but over-all the international community is not sufficiently supporting the intermedation that can help the extension of Zones of Peace philosophy and practices.

5.   ON THE WORKSHOP DYNAMICS, THE RESULTS AND THE FOLLOW-UP

At the workshop, the participants exchanged basic information on their respective contexts. Interesting similarities and differences were explored. After an initial round of introductions, monologues developed in to dialogue. Yet, time was too short to an in-depth discussion on all of the relevant topics. In breaks and after the workshop, the direct 'bilateral' exchanges helped a lot to learn from the experiences of the other participants. This, possibly, created secondary impacts more useful than the workshop impact itself, but this is hard to establish or evaluate.

We had excellent interpreters at the meetings, but still working with various languages remains a problem. Words often have differents meanings or connotations in different regions. It would be useful, for the whole program, to develop a small glossary on the most important words. Future meetings ought to involve partiicpants from fewer conflict regions.

Follow-up activities:
- The group will stay in touch after this meeting and the UCLG conference, in order to keep exchanging experiences and best practices. Participants will receive the workshop report and a list of names and E-mail addresses.
- Input in the other program activities: the program 'Strengthening Local Government Capacity for Peacebuilding and Reconstruction in Fragile States' consists of a number of activities. The findings and provisional recommendations of the workshop will be incorporated in a structured way in these activities, by VNG and IKV Pax Christi. VNG and IKV Pax Christi will elaborate as well other possibilities for the workshop participants to give their direct personal input in these activities as well. The workshop participants can function as a sounding board committee throughout the programme.
- A need is felt by the workshop participants to have another opportunity to meet and deepen the level of mutual understanding, in support of formulating more and more precise conclusions and recommendations. VNG and IKV Pax Christi will see whether such a follow-up workshop is feasible - referably focusing on one or two specific aspects.