

Mediating Violent Conflict

Between 9th and 13th march 2009 the United States Institute of Peace organized the course “Mediating Violent Conflict” in Washington D.C. as part of its conflict management training programme. The course aimed at providing an overview of mediation in contemporary international and intrastate conflict, situating mediation in a larger peacemaking or international affairs context and at building competences for practicing mediation. Conflict management education and research into peace and conflict are among the core activities of the Åland Islands Peace Institute and hence the Institute’s Sarah Stephan did not miss this chance to learn more about mediation in sensitive inter- and intrastate conflict settings.

Conflict management is one of the central activities of the Åland Islands Peace Institute. Our Youth Office offers “step by step” education on conflict management for schools on Åland and organizes youth exchanges for young people from conflict regions, providing them with a forum where they can discuss their concerns with each other in a peaceful environment here on Åland. The researchers working at the Peace Institute do research into i.a. peace and conflict and most notably into the Åland example, one of the rare examples for a peaceful solution of an international dispute. Ålands Medlingsbyrå offers mediation in accordance with the Finnish Act on Conciliation in Criminal and Certain Civil Cases and deals with more than 50 cases a year. Moreover, the Åland Islands Peace Institute is often contacted with the request for detailed information about the Åland example by different stakeholders in conflicts with autonomy implications. Upon some of these requests the Åland Islands Peace Institute has participated as a resource organisation in conferences on conflict management in Northern Cyprus, Kashmir and Thailand. Through all these activities the Peace Institute has acquired great expertise in the area of mediation which it is keen to develop further. The experience of the Peace Institute shows that among other mediators such as diplomats, international governmental organisations and even religious organisations, local, regional and international NGOs are increasingly recognized as valuable resources and actors in mediating (violent) conflict. But what role can representatives of NGOs really play? If NGOs or any other third party is engaged in the management of a conflict how should they go about mediating between the conflicting parties?

To succeed any mediator will need to use his or her most important tool: listening.

What I learned during the United States Institute of Peace course I visited between 9th and 13th march in Washington is that these are legitimate questions and that there are many more questions that have to be answered before engaging in any mediation, on any level, be it between a head of state and a militia leader, between two rural villages fighting about access to resources or between your roommates fighting about kitchen hygiene.

The course started off with an introduction to conflict analysis and thus by pointing to the vast problems that are revealed when trying to get an initial understanding of a conflict. The questions who, what, where, why, when and how are often hard to tackle and require an in-depth knowledge of the conflict. To succeed any mediator will need to use his or her most important tool: listening. In the course of the week we went back to the importance of narratives frequently. The narratives that all conflicting parties tell about the conflict are essential in understanding what it is they are fighting about and to find out where the solution to a conflict might be found.

Although any third party working for the solution of a conflict should remain seized on its development, mediation is an instrument that is most useful and can be most successful in bearing a peace agreement when the conflict is “ripe”. Certainly, working towards peace is a continuous task however, mediation as a tool to reach a peace agreement is most promising when all parties are caught in a mutually hurting stalemate. Mediation becomes an attractive alternative to armed struggle only when there is a mutually enticing opportunity. These are only two aspects that I was inspired to think about during the session on ripeness.

The course was well structured and aimed not only at conveying the intellectual capacity to analyse a

conflict but also practical skills to the group of 17 participants from diverse backgrounds such as independent mediation, foreign ministries, international development agencies and NGOs. An introductory exercise placed the course participants in the positions of the stakeholders of the Kirkuk conflict, another exercise engaged the participants in petro-diplomacy. During the course of the week all participants were able to compose a mediation strategy for the Mindanao conflict in the Philippines, the main case study of the course. The different groups (US, contact group, neighboring states and NGO) then presented their strategies to the former US ambassador to the Philippines Frank Ricciardone. Ricciardone encouraged especially NGOs to be engaged in conflict regions and work towards the resolution of conflicts as they have qualities state actors do not necessarily have: access to the grassroots, to the people suffering from conflict and their concerns. The exercises were extremely valuable to me as they made me realise that despite the differences between mediation in domestic contexts and

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inter-/intrastate violent conflicts or mediation between members of your own family or group of friends, the human component, emotions like grief, anger, rage, vengeance or exhaustion remain the same. It became apparent that the main quality a mediator should have is sensitivity to the circumstances of the specific conflict and that his or her main tool is listening to the parties and picking up on the possible solutions that the conflicting parties have explicitly or implicitly put on the table themselves. The conflict management training programme of the United States Institute of Peace consists of a range of core analytical courses, strategic courses on concepts, tools and skills and sectoral courses which are offered throughout the entire year and held in Washington D.C.

Further information can be found under www.usip.org or inquired from education@usip.org.

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