Mobilizing Public Opinion for Peace:
The Next Challenge for the Peacebuilding Communities

A Response by Martina Weitsch

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1. Introduction

Simon Fisher and Lada Zimina raise a lot of important and timely questions. Their paper is a helpful stimulus for peacebuilders and it has certainly set off discussions. My response aims to contribute to these and if it appears, at least in part, controversial and even hard-edged, this is in the spirit of the provocation of the paper.

While heartily welcoming the arrival of this provocative text, I see two major shortcomings in the authors' argument which I want to address in my comment. First, I want to unpack the conceptualisation of peacebuilding, especially Fisher and Zimina's use of terms like 'peacebuilding community', 'global society' or 'change agents' (*Section 2*). The second deficit I detect is with respect to important actors and dimensions of action. In particular the European Union, which has set up a variety of peacebuilding activities in the past two decades, is completely absent from the analysis. The same applies for activities of civil society actors at the EU level. There is scant reference to the role of NGOs working in this regional setting, nor is there any reference to the EU as a distinct and important actor for them to relate to. I argue that the experiences of these actors have to be analysed more carefully, and present some of them in *Section 3*. In the final section, I will address what I see as a crucial next step in building peace and achieving greater social justice: how to galvanise public opinion, take personal responsibility and thus help to generate political will.

2. Clarifying Terms: Success or Failure of 'Peacebuilding Communities'

I want to question, first, the conceptualisation of peacebuilding that is suggested by Fisher and Zimina. At a first glance the distinction between a technical and a transformative approach seems helpful. But on closer inspection, it appears too short-sighted. There are many other categories according to which the peacebuilding communities might be distinguished: along a spectrum from peace movement to peace industry, from grassroots to international focus or origin, from a personal to a political approach and from a local to an external intervention concept. Each of these 'peacebuilding communit*ies*' will define their concepts differently.

Clarification is also needed when it comes to the term 'change agents'. Fisher and Zimina use it in a way that implies that change agents are always a force for good. I think this is too simplistic. In many conflict settings we can observe strong actors that strive for social change, but in a way that serves their own particular interests and does not respond to social needs. We need to be clear whenever we use such a term that we specify change agents *for what*.

I see a need to clarify what different peacebuilding communities there are and where the concrete fault lines may lie which impede our success.[1] I have said above that I see peacebuilding communities as a highly differentiated range of groups and organisations with different origins and focal areas – which needs to be taken into account to aid analysis of successes or failures. A full description of all the different facets of the peacebuilding communities is beyond the scope of this short response, so I will only talk about one of the key distinctions that could be made. It is what I will call the division between the 'peace industry' and the 'peace movement'.[2]

2.1 Peace Industry and Peace Movement

The difference in the definitions of success and failure between these two communities relates first to the time frame: the peace industry plans within a shorter term framework; the peace movement uses a longer term one. Second, they use different types of measures: in the peace industry they are related to project cycles and project output; in the peace movement they are related to changes in social paradigms.

The peace industry, in its extreme form, characterises the groups and organisations which are criticised by Fisher and Zimina as taking a too technical approach. The focus is on projects, on donors and on achieving the objectives of contracts. It can attract people who see peacebuilding 'out there' as a bit of an adventure, as a better lifestyle than could be achieved elsewhere. This attitude is not limited to international (for which read: Northern) NGOs, but there are a lot of such NGOs among this section of the peacebuilding communities. They are as likely as anyone else to have good intentions and good ideas; but the constraints of the funding proposals and contracts, and the fact that a lot of the money that is available comes in huge amounts which require elaborate management and administration, all militate against implementing organisations being anchored in local communities affected by violence.[3]

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1 By talking about 'our' success, I am clearly aligning myself with these peacebuilding communities and am looking at them from the inside. That has risks – one of which is that one is too critical; the other that one is not critical enough. I recognize this and have attempted to minimize both faults.

2 I recognize that some will feel offended by this division. It is one which I use to make a point. It is not intended to denigrate anyone's effort. It is, in some ways, a caricature and therefore prone to the potential failure of caricatures.

3 *Editors' note*: See also the contribution of Goran Bozicevic to this Dialogue (69-76).

These organisations are also more likely to be seen as being co-opted by the powers that be. For example, there is much effort in some quarters to buy them into high-tech security and surveillance equipment for their own safety, which would in turn give the security technology industry (an industry heavily based in the arms industry) a 'good guy' image.[4] It has to be said that this attempt has met with only limited success among the NGOs concerned; but even a limited buy-in to the thinking that comes from this sector involves serious risks.

There is the question of how engaged and connected with local societies such organisations are or can be on the ground. Again, experience varies and there are peacebuilders in this type of NGO who are working on a small scale at local level, living with local people and experiencing the privations of life in areas of actual violent conflict or the immediate aftermath of such conflict. But there are also those who live comfortably in ex-pat enclaves.[5] This, too, is a risk for this part of the peacebuilding communities, because the knowledge of those who are working in conflict or post-conflict situations is invaluable to those who are working on advocacy or more technical aspects. Isolating oneself from the experience of conflict can seriously undermine both valuable knowledge and credibility.

The peace movement, on the other hand, has lost its momentum, thus affecting the outreach and impact of peacebuilding activities. We had a sense of direction in the anti-nuclear marches, the marches protesting against the Vietnam War – it seemed so easy back then. But the nuclear arsenals are still there, even if they are smaller. Where have the drive and the energy gone? Today there is a sense of fragmentation. The anti-war protests in 2002 and 2003 did not have enough of a unifying impact (even though they were impressive), because there were too many different groups focusing on their issues. Despite the fact that they were essentially about saying 'no' to an illegal war about to be started by 'our' governments, I remember being uncomfortable about the range of slogans represented on the march in Brussels – there were many different voices demanding many different things. The message that this was first and foremost about peace and not about being 'anti-UK' or 'anti-US' got drowned out. (This was also one of the ways in which the media were able to sideline the focal message.)

That fragmentation has also meant that it has been difficult to keep the momentum of these marches going in other ways; of keeping up the pressure on our governments so that it would result in action. Marches are not the only way that the peace movement can be effective; but in order to be effective as a long-term factor in changing the political landscape, it has to have some common focus. A commitment to nonviolence, for example, could serve as a common focus and foster the credibility of peacebuilding activities.

2.2 Peacebuilding and the Corporate Sector

Apart from the need to join in social movements, linkages with the corporate sector will be essential for long-term strategies.

In a globalised world, the corporate sector, often but not always in the form of multinational companies, wields power in a way that is quite alien to old-style political engagement. Getting a message across to a member of a national or the European parliament has little tangible effect in that context. Industrial and commercial lobbies, connections between political and economic power bases all mean that even governments have less power than we might think. The ability of business to move capital and production from one part of the world to another implies that a different relationship with business is necessary.

4 For example, at a conference in Brussels in 2005 called "Faster and More United – The Debate about Europe's Crisis Management Capacity" the high-tech industry was out in force, getting excited about all manner of hardware and software which would guarantee the safety of actors in the field – with some passing reference to the spin-off into open source intelligence thus available to decision-makers.

5 One young man I spoke to, who recently returned from an assignment in the field, stated that, "Europeans just wouldn't be able to cope with living with the deprivations of local people" – this with reference to certain countries in Africa…

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The peace movement has not had a good track record of engaging here. Business, even more than governments, is seen as 'the enemy' and engaging with it is seen as quite close to selling out. So we need to develop ways of engaging with business that do not involve selling out. Fisher and Zimina's point about the role of business going well beyond a bit of Corporate Social Responsibility (CRS) is well made – but we have to start somewhere. If engaging with business at the CSR level gets us and our ideas in through the door, then that may be worth it. Just as in government, in business there can be insiders who are looking for alternatives; it is important to find them and to network with them.

In this context, the peace industry might have a better starting point, as the actors in such organisations are more likely to come across as 'professional'. But there is a risk that the peace industry, too, has too narrow a view of the private sector. They might see private sector actors primarily as potential donors and therefore only important as sources of money. Or they might see them primarily as competitors: if the private sector engages in peacebuilding directly, working with local populations (who may well be their employees) then where does that leave the NGOs? In some cases, the private sector also operates as a contractor on major reconstruction projects where government money is flowing (potentially away from NGOs).

Clearly, this is an area where peacebuilding communities need to proceed with caution and with good analysis; where we need to avoid getting involved with those corporate actors who want to maintain the status quo which guarantees them maximum profit. But some engagement is important and unavoidable.

At the end of the day, despite the differences, there also are synergies: the different communities need each other and we should build on differences as being a strength.

3. NGO-Cooperation at the European Regional Level

In this section, I want to fill a blind spot in Fisher and Zimina's analysis and present some experiences of NGO-networking at the European Union level. For the last 8 years, peacebuilding NGOs focusing some or all of their work on advocacy within the EU decision-making structures have developed a platform within which they cooperate and collaborate. The platform, formally established in 2001, is called the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO). It has, in July 2008, some 25 member organisations ranging widely across the peacebuilding communities.[6]

EPLO was founded as a result of the initiative of a number of NGOs, the history of which goes back to 1997. 17 organisations were listed as founding members in the founding document. The express purpose of the organisation was and is twofold: to provide advocacy towards EU institutions on issues relating to conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and to ensure that member organisations have the necessary information about conflict prevention and security policy approaches of the EU to enable them to engage effectively at that level.

Starting with a secretariat of one person, the organisation has grown to a small office of 6 staff. It works predominantly through a number of thematic working groups and continues to make its decisions in a democratic and transparent way. It produces policy papers and reports, advocates at all levels in the European institutions, and has, in the last few years, participated in EU- and Member State-funded projects on conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Why is this relevant to the discussion? The most important reason is because EPLO is, at least in part, a response to Fisher and Zimina's comments on the issue of 'jealous autonomy'.

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6 Further information on the current membership of EPLO and its organs can be found at www.eplo.org.

EPLO is a platform which for the first four years of its existence survived entirely on contributions from member organisations. Its members have made a commitment (reinforced again and again in decisions of the General Assembly) to retain sufficient financial independence to survive without external funding. It has worked successfully on joint projects with funding from governments and from the EU and has thus overcome the implicit jealousies regarding funding and political visibility. It is, in short, a model which shows that 'jealous autonomy' is not inevitable.

It is also important to say that EPLO is a significant part of the inter-platform dialogues at the European regional level, where NGOs from different sectors (development, environment, peacebuilding, human rights, etc.) come together to develop joint positions and joint approaches on relevant issues. So there is a degree of developing connections between people thinking about the drivers of conflict from different angles, also a point urged by Fisher and Zimina.

Of course, EPLO is not the only network or platform of peacebuilding NGOs. For example, the European Centre for Conflict Prevention (ECCP)[7] and the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC)[8] both seek to connect peacebuilding organisations and help them to work together more effectively. The reason EPLO is highlighted here is because it is the one and only network which focuses exclusively on the European Union (EU) and thus brings into focus the important role the EU itself plays in the area of peacebuilding.

3.1 The Significant Role of the EU in Peacebuilding

The EU undertakes a significant amount of external action and some foreign policy on behalf of the Member States.[9] It acts for the Member States in international fora, for example the World Trade Organization (WTO). As trade is an important factor in terms of economic justice, and as such can be a conflict driver as well as a force for good, the EU's action can have a clear impact on issues of social justice. Furthermore, the EU's much criticised Common Agricultural Policy, its fisheries policy, its emerging energy and more developed environmental policies all have a bearing on the question of how to build sustainable peace globally.

The EU has also developed policy approaches which could be a model in being change agents for peace. The EU is, after all, in itself a peace project and as such exceptionally successful, in the sense that it has contributed to reconciling countries that confronted each other as enemies in the Second World War. For those of us old enough to remember this war itself or, as in my case, the immediate aftermath, this is a point which cannot be made too often.

But even more recently, the Cotonou Agreement (on cooperation with African, Caribbean and Pacific states) agreed in 2000, the Göteborg Programme (on conflict prevention) agreed in 2001 and the establishment of the Peacebuilding Partnership under the Stability Instrument (in 2007) are all steps towards a more conflict-sensitive approach on the part of the EU. This does not mean that the EU has already successfully mainstreamed its policies according to peacebuilding necessities. It has to be said that EU policies in themselves are very often contradictory. But there are signs that the political discourse at the EU level is more conflict-sensitive than the discourse in some of the European capitals. This is also where points of entry can be found for NGOs and their networks in mobilizing for peace.

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7 For more information see: www.conflict-prevention.net/page.php?id=76.
8 For more information see: www.gppac.net/page.php?id=1.
9 This comment is too short to go into detail about the role of the EU in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. For a detailed analysis of this see QCEA 2007, available at www.quaker.org/qcea/archive/index.html#download or www.eplo.org/index.php?id=225.

3.2 Achievements and Limits of NGO-Cooperation and Lobbying at EU Level

In many ways the peacebuilding communities are relatively new in the EU environment. Development and humanitarian NGOs are much more firmly established in the minds of decision-makers. That said, the peacebuilding community as represented by EPLO (and a number of other NGOs who work in project partnerships with EPLO) has made some significant steps in the right direction. Some examples are:

- the successful negotiations surrounding the establishment of the Peacebuilding Partnership[10] in the context of the Stability Instrument;[11]
- the development of an ongoing dialogue with the Council Secretariat of the EU and with actors responsible for crisis management;
- the establishment of EPLO as a partner in dialogue about the development/security nexus and issues of conflict sensitivity;
- the successful discussion with the European Investment Bank on their approach to conflict sensitivity in their lending decisions.

More specifically, in a process pursued by EPLO over the last four or so years, dialogue with the EU on civilian crisis management has also evolved from a position where NGOs were not even considered as being part of the picture to a position where we have built enough trust with decision-makers to have ongoing dialogue.[12] This process is an important part of working with people within the policy and decision-making frameworks who might be looking for alternatives; though in this case the people concerned (the Member States' representatives within the relevant decision-making structures) might not have realised from the start that they were looking for this. But in the medium term, it has been acknowledged both by them and in an unpublished independent external assessment of EPLO's work that minds are being changed.

What works in this context is persistence (we are dealing with busy people and we are not usually at the top of their list of priorities), a professional approach (if we say we will deliver something, then we do), engagement at the right level (we inform ourselves well before we engage about the issues which are important to the people we talk to, we understand where they fit into the big picture and we respond to this), and an attitude of partnership (we all want to make a positive impact and there is no 'us and them' attitude). In other words, we try to act in a peaceful and nonviolent way.

Nevertheless it has to be admitted that more must be done in order to enhance effective networking among CSOs and between those actors and the EU agencies. And as so often, the very aspects that work also present some of the difficulties:

- sometimes the demands made on us make delivery very difficult – short time-scales, lack of funding and difficulties with the bureaucracy of visa requirements, for example, make it difficult to bring local actors from the field into the discussions, and we have to deal with the credibility dilemma which this presents;
- those of us, like me, who sometimes want to be more radical than is helpful in discussions with policy makers have to accept that we have to curb those instincts, and we have to accept that this can leave us with questions of integrity;
- the ongoing failure to reach the highest levels of decision-makers also means that we may not quite be getting our message to where it is most needed. Talking to the people we talk to

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10 For more information about the Peacebuilding Partnership see: http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/ifs/pbp_en.htm.
11 For more information about the Stability Instrument see: http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/ifs/index_en.htm.
12 This process has been documented by QCEA and EPLO in the joint paper *People are Party to Building Peace*. Accessible at: www.quaker.org/qcea/archive/index.html#download or www.eplo.org/index.php?id=224.

can sometimes feel like preaching to the choir. They are already convinced. We might have to comfort ourselves with the sense that we provide them with the information and analysis they need to influence policy at higher levels.

4. Mobilizing Public Opinion and Generating Political Will

As has been outlined in the previous sections, mobilizing representatives of the corporate sector and political decision-makers is essential for peacebuilding. But this in itself is not enough, although without it nothing else will have lasting effect. We live in a globalised world where powerful interests are at work guarding the status quo for themselves and for their profits – those powerful interests include us, but equally importantly also the corporate sector, political elites, groups and individuals everywhere who benefit directly from violence and war. In order to change the status quo, it is therefore imperative to get public opinion galvanised.

What I mean by public opinion in this context is the response of the general public in the global North to the issues which the peacebuilding communities are trying to address. My own – maybe slightly caricatured – view of public opinion is that people are affected to a certain extent by what they see in the media about conflict in other countries (the nearer to home the more affected they are likely to be), but they tend to forget the issues when they have faded from the headlines. They are not very likely to see the connections between their relatively privileged lifestyle and the conflicts they hear about. They are not willing to change their own lifestyles to contribute to changing the glaring inequalities in the world. And they would not readily vote for politicians who focus on peacebuilding mainly because elections tend to be focused on domestic issues.

The media have a role to play here, but they, too, cater for what they perceive to be the things that the public is interested in. So the peacebuilding communities need to focus on how to get their message into the media *and* how to make it resound with the general public. One can imagine several ways to tackle this: not just by focusing on documentaries and news programmes, but for example by getting our message into the story lines of soap operas. Maybe we should develop some sort of reality TV competition which picks up on our issues. Some of the organisations in the peacebuilding communities have extensive experience in working with and through the media;[13] we need to encourage them to also look at how to shift the thinking in the global North. Furthermore, there are some political allies in political parties who might give us a platform; we should use those. If we can identify a common product which many people buy regularly which is connected to fuelling specific conflicts, then a mass campaign for their boycott might contribute to a shift in thinking (South African grapes, Barclays Bank – both during the Apartheid years – are good examples). Finally, another way of shifting public opinion can be to engage young people: getting peace education into schools can help to sensitise children to the *local* issues of bullying and how to deal with them; such steps can then also develop awareness of more global concerns.

In short, politicians and the corporate sector listen to public opinion if it affects the ballot box or the bottom line. That has been demonstrated if nowhere else then in South Africa (in terms of the bottom line).[14] To effect real change, public opinion has to be part of the equation so that there is an intrinsic wish on the part of politicians and corporate interests to change their behaviour and thus change the world. That is the greatest challenge the peacebuilding communities face in the global North. It is the next task the peacebuilding communities must tackle jointly, by developing approaches which build on all of our strengths. We all have something to bring to that task; we all

13 One example is Search for Common Ground; see: www.sfcg.org.
14 The boycotting of South African imports and companies during the Apartheid years at least contributed to the end of Apartheid.

need to share our dreams, our technical and political knowledge, our networks, our influence and our financial resources. If we can do that, not only will we no longer be wasting our time, we will be the change we want to bring about.

In addition, we have to take personal responsibility in our daily lives and improve our private capacities for peace. Peacebuilding should be based on the firm foundation of seeking to achieve appropriate nonviolent, political systems for conflict resolution everywhere. But a lot of conflict is driven by global inequalities; in order to gain credibility in peacebuilding, those who benefit from that inequality (in particular in the global North) first of all have to focus on political change of their own policies. The feminist movement of the 1970s postulated that the personal is political. It is. But that also implies that the political is the personal. We cannot hide our own affluence behind either political or technical activism. Are we prepared to do that?

It means that we – who consider ourselves part of the peacebuilding communities – accept that we are part of the problem. We have to shift our view and accept that 'us' going off to help 'them' is unlikely to be the complete or even necessarily an appropriate answer. We need to see ourselves less as the 'decision-makers' in terms of what is 'good for them' but rather as listeners to the solutions which are developed by those people who are suffering under the current political status quo. And, as a consequence, we have to be prepared to give up our enormous privileges. We need to consume less (energy, water, food, other resources). We also have to ask ourselves where our own complicity is. Are our pension funds invested in companies that are complicit in holding up a globally or locally unjust system? Do we hold shares in these companies directly? How are our organisation's funds invested? Do we bank with the financiers of companies who work directly against the interests of peace?

As long as we think of 'global society' as 'the powerful', we are still a long way from recognizing that we are all part of global society. We – as groups and individuals – have some room to manoeuvre and a certain responsibility to act for a secure and just global society. Security is indivisible. As long as there is anyone in the world who suffers injustice and insecurity, none of us has security and justice. I believe that only the incorporation of this radical recognition will allow us to adopt an approach that will lead to significant (global) change.

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See also...

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