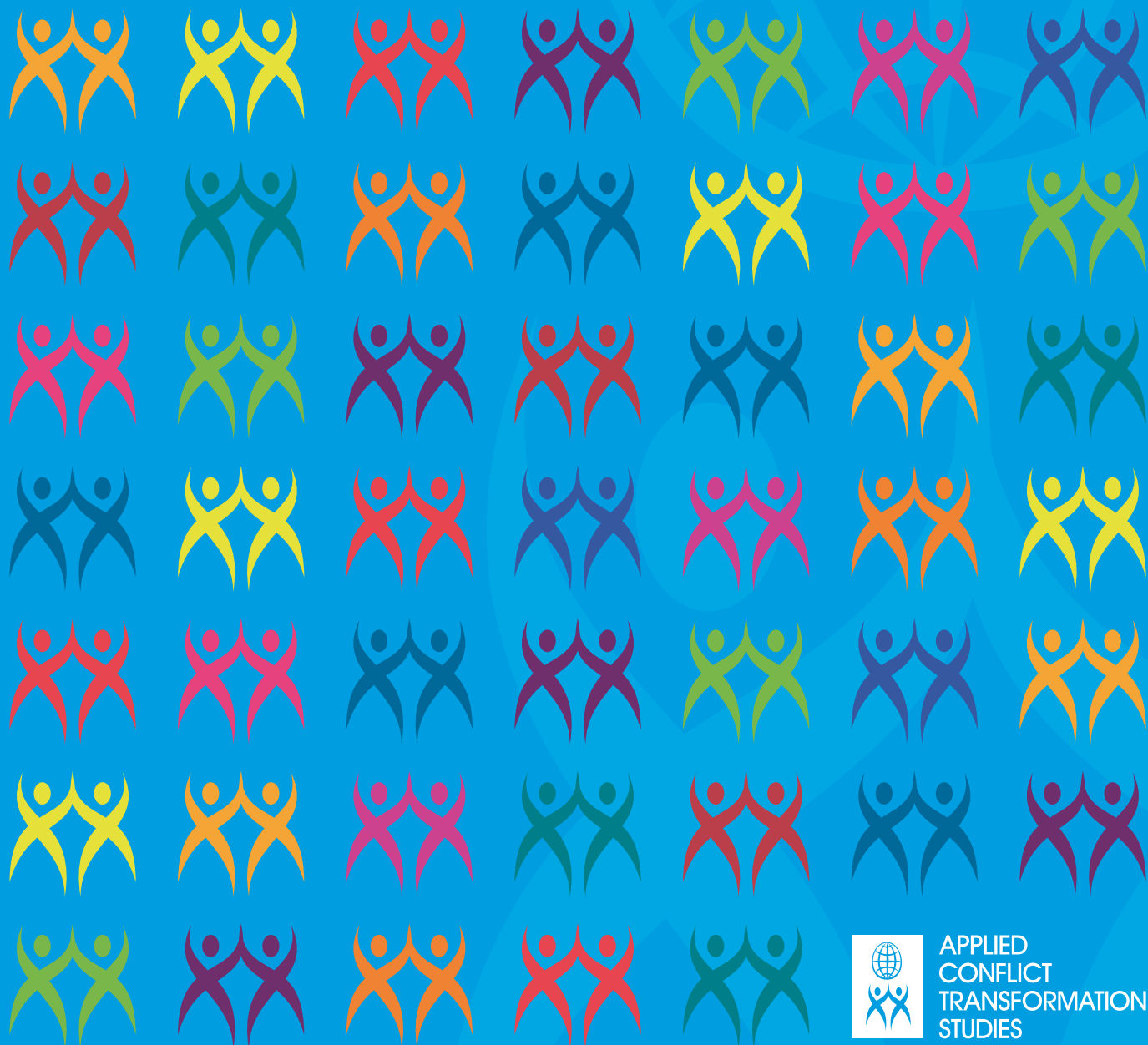




Reflections on developing a peacebuilding and capacity-building programme

January 2008





APPLIED CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION STUDIES

Applied Conflict Transformation Studies (ACTS)

is a global peacebuilding programme whose goal is to support and promote sustained and multi-level work for peace and justice. Our aims are to:

- Contribute to and challenge the body of knowledge in the field of conflict transformation by producing research developed from practitioners' experience which has been rigorously tested through an academic course;
- Work with practitioners and their organisations to build their capacity to intervene strategically and effectively within their own situations, and to develop their understanding of what works from their own experience.

ACTS has regional centres in both Asia and the Balkans. In Asia the partners are Pannasastra University of Cambodia and the Alliance for Conflict Transformation. In the Balkans the partners are Novi Sad University and the Nansen Dialogue Network.

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Acknowledgements

This booklet has been compiled with contributions from many of the people who have been involved in implementing the first phase of the ACTS programmes.

Our thanks go to all of those who have made this possible. In particular we would like to thank Diana Francis, who has helped us to collect and compile these articles.

The ACTS programme is currently funded by the Department of International Development, as part of a joint project with Skillshare International.

Acronyms

ACTS	Applied Conflict Transformation Studies
NDC	Nansen Dialogue Centre
RTC	Responding to Conflict
SFDC	Solidarity for Developing Communities



Preface

This document presents an experimental project: one that is still in its infancy but that has had to grow fast, and is packed with accumulated experience and learning. The experience has been rich and also challenging. There is much to celebrate and much to work on. But the spirit of enquiry that is the hallmark of Action Research and is at the heart of ACTS will, I hope, be evident to readers in all that follows.

Action Research of one kind or another has been in use since the 1940s, but the type that has been chosen for ACTS, though it too has been developed over many years, still represents a radical departure from other, more familiar research approaches. It follows rigorous academic principles for gathering, analysing and interpreting data. It also draws on existing theory, and is designed to contribute to knowledge in its field. What makes it so different is that it is 'first person' research, embracing and working with the researchers' own subjective experience and perspective as they carry out their action. It is this action that is subjected to scrutiny and analysis – its theory, planning, implementation and impact – and the researchers' perceptions and interpretations are supplemented and challenged by others, in an 'intersubjective' reflective process.

The researchers are called upon to look not only outward, to their work and to the wider field, but inward, to observe and analyse their own inner motives and responses, both emotional and rational, and the impact of these on their behaviour. Self-awareness is a vital skill for practitioners in this field, and research of this kind is designed to produce not only transferable knowledge but also personal development in skill and understanding.

It was hard for all concerned to grasp an approach to research that is so different from any they had encountered or heard about before, and – as will be apparent – some of the research carried out in these first groups was in practice a mix of more familiar forms of sociological research and this kind of Action

Research. These first ACTS tutors and students were pioneers. Their learning from what has sometimes been a difficult process will be a future resource, not only for them but also for those who follow.

In future an ACTS Journal will be produced that will be devoted mainly to the research coming out of the ACTS programme. However, in this first booklet of reflections the first and more substantial section will be entitled *The Journey*. It will be devoted to the development of ACTS and the way it has been experienced by those involved: the originating and co-ordinating organisation, Responding to Conflict (RTC), the co-ordinators of the two current centres, and their students and tutors.

In sections two and three, two students from each centre will present their research, and all the students who joined and completed the first ACTS course will be introduced. Although the different contributors have worked to a given remit, they have all tackled their task in their own way. We hope that the result is a happy mix of structure and variety, and that you will enjoy this booklet, finding inspiration in what you read, as well as food for thought.







The journey

The section contains a selection of articles about the development of ACTS from the different perspectives of partners, students and tutors.

ONE

The development of ACTS

by **ALEXANDRA MOORE (ACTS Programme Coordinator, RTC)** and **SIMON FISHER (Lead Trainer and Coordinator, RTC, until April 2007)**

It is a privilege and a pleasure to be able to introduce this collection of articles which represents the reflections of some of those involved in the ACTS programme, just four years after the journey officially began for RTC and for all the partners, co-ordinators, tutors and students who have been involved along the way.

Origins

The origins of the ACTS programme can be traced back to a consultation of international conflict transformation practitioners convened by RTC in 1998 in Derry, Northern Ireland. The key questions addressed were: How can we work with practitioners to take their understanding and skills to the next level? How can we broaden the theoretical basis of the field of conflict transformation to ensure that it reflects, and responds to, reality on the ground?

The consultation took place against a background in which human rights and democratic liberties were increasingly coming under threat in many places. Since then this trend has increased, particularly following the US response to the attacks of September 11th 2001. This, together with the huge problems posed by resource competition and climate change, makes it ever more urgent to promote rights-based, nonviolent peace and conflict transformation work, worldwide. To make an adequate response to this need, in complex, fast-changing and intractable situations, RTC and its partners in the ACTS programme believe that it is necessary to build a critical mass of practitioners and policy makers

who have both practical expertise and thorough knowledge in the field of conflict transformation. Currently most civil society practitioners (and policy shapers and makers) have little structured opportunity even to stop and think about their experience, much less to develop their analysis of it in relation to existing and developing theory, to explore patterns and explanations, and articulate their insights as actors.

There is now a wide range of elementary training courses in conflict transformation, offered by a variety of agencies. But the conflict-related issues facing governments and civil society pose challenges that go well beyond the basic nature of this training. There are also many peace studies courses delivered by universities, which offer important opportunities to their students. But our experience and research suggests that there is an unmet need among change agents for advanced studies in conflict transformation that are focused not only on past experience but also on the current practice of its students: a place where students' current thinking is challenged and refined through an academically rigorous framework, in a process that enables them to generate their data as they work and to inform their practice with their learning as they go.

A new way to bridge the academic-practitioner divide

The ACTS programme was set up principally to create such an opportunity. It offers a two-year, part-time Masters course in conflict transformation that provides a new bridge between traditional academic research and the wealth of experience that exists on the ground. ACTS is rooted in the work of participants, enabling them to develop their practical skills, reflect on their work, and forge new theory in the fire of their own action.





Each course aims to enable students to contribute to – and challenge – the established body of knowledge in the field of peacebuilding, from the practitioner perspective. The approach taken in ACTS is underpinned by a set of explicit values, including diversity, inclusiveness, justice, cultural sensitivity, mutual respect, nonviolence, and environmental sensitivity.

Action learning and research

Action Research, combined with the study of conflict theories and the practice of conflict-handling skills, is at the core of each ACTS course. The ACTS programme is based upon the concepts, approach and ethos developed at the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP) at the University of Bath. ACTS course members engage in repeated cycles of action and reflection in order to investigate and strengthen a particular aspect of their work and practice. Starting with a focus on their own thinking and behaviour, students are encouraged to think more deeply about their role in working for social and political change. How can they deepen their understanding of their own role as agents of change and leaders in their organisations and communities?

This is an approach that puts a premium on developing awareness of self, awareness of others and their different perspectives, and a consciousness of one's own motivations and values.

While there is a strong focus in action research on the individual practitioner, this is not 'navel gazing': the process requires students also to look closely at the nature of the work they are doing and the way in which they are carrying it out. When is our work successful, and why? In what ways does it need to improve? How can we be more strategic to bring about real change in our communities and societies? What then can our colleagues and organisations learn from our research? And what does this research mean for the wider field of conflict transformation? ACTS enables students to write about their work and practice, drawing on and developing existing knowledge in their field, in the light of their research-in-action.

Global yet local

Each course is based in a defined geographical region, and is owned and delivered by three partners: a local university, a regional NGO, and RTC. RTC, as the global partner, takes responsibility for coordinating the wider aspects of the programme. The regional NGO and university share primary responsibility for running the regional centres, including recruitment, teaching, and the day-to-day management of the courses.

The ACTS programme has developed a core curriculum, which is used in each regional course but is shaped to suit the needs of the participants and the context in which they are working. The ACTS teaching teams bring together course tutors from the region who have the local knowledge and understanding, with international tutors who bring a wider perspective.

The global nature of the ACTS programme is intended to enable partners, tutors and students to gain additional insights from the experiences and perspectives of the different regions, and ensure quality and standards in all aspects of the course.

Progress so far

While the initial idea for ACTS originated with RTC, it grew in collaboration with many people around the world, and has developed through partnerships with those who are now running the regional centres.

To date, two centres have been established: in Asia and the Balkans. The partners in Asia are the Alliance for Conflict Transformation and Pannasastra University, and in the Balkans they are the Nansen Dialogue Network and Novi Sad University. Interest has also been expressed in establishing centres in Africa, the Americas, and Western Europe.

Each of the six modules in this course consists of a residential seminar, together with work-based learning, study, and written assignments in the student's home context. This ensures that students can work and study at the same time, and reflects the integration of action and learning which is central





to the course. It also ensures that organisations directly benefit from the course and do not lose a valuable member of staff for a long period. The approach to teaching and learning in ACTS is modelled on that used for many years in RTC, which is drawn from 'best practice' in adult learning. It is interactive and participatory in style, drawing on the existing knowledge of students. Lectures, tutorials, group work, simulations, role-plays and case studies all have their place, along with individual reflection and study. Course members are seen as both teachers and learners from the start. All have a chance to teach their colleagues as well as to learn from them, and are supported in this by their tutors.

The students to date are practitioners working across a variety of overlapping fields including development, human rights, education, peace, and reconciliation. They come from a wide range of civil society organisations, including international NGOs, community-based NGOs, and faith-based organisations. As ACTS continues, the plan is for recruitment in each region to draw in students from different constituencies (such as politicians, educators, civil society leaders), according to each centre's analysis of what is needed for change.

Base camp is reached

The articles in this booklet are a recognition of all that has been achieved in the ACTS programme so far: we have reached base camp, so to speak. It is both a celebration for our students, who have been enthusiastic 'guinea pigs' for this first course, and for the tutors and co-ordinators who have developed the course together and delivered it.

It is also a recognition that we are just starting on the ACTS journey. It will come as no surprise to learn that the past two years have been full of highs and lows for all involved! The high points include starting the first courses, the moments when we have seen individuals (and whole student groups) move up to another level of thinking and analysis, and watching students celebrate as they finish the course. But there have been difficult moments: misunderstandings about what Action

Research entails, difficulties in coming to terms with the demands of academic thinking and writing, tensions in the relationship between university and NGO partners, each with their distinctive aspirations, values and discourse, and – for students and tutors – the struggle to bring research dissertations up to the required standard.

We are continuing to learn much about running the ACTS programme. Who are the most appropriate students for the course? How do we support and encourage busy practitioners (who do not necessarily have an academic background) to gain the most from their time on the course? How can we all work together in a truly international partnership? How can we combine the best aspects of traditional university education and participative adult learning methods?

The ACTS programme is now generating clear evidence that it is 'working'. There is developing confidence, competence and creativity in individual students, which has been noticed not only by them but also by their tutors and their colleagues. A growing number of students have been able to adapt and re-focus their work programmes as a result of their participation, to make them more effective. And the Action Research is beginning to develop real depth, already seen in the examples from the first groups of students in Asia and the Balkans that are presented here.

We hope you will find this booklet both enjoyable and thought-provoking. We hope also that you will continue to follow, and support, the progress of ACTS in the future.





Reflections from the ACTS Asia participants' perspective

by **TULASI R. NEPAL**, from Nepal, and **BOBICHAND MEITEI RAJKUMAR**, from Manipur, North East India

We are two students from the first group in ACTS Asia which began in 2005 and is now, at the time of writing, almost completed. In this article we hold up a mirror to our experience, as individuals and as a group. We will begin by introducing ourselves and describing how we came to be on the course. Then we will present a variety of experiences and viewpoints expressed to us by fellow students, and finally bring in some broad reflections of our own.

Tulasi's story

In 2004, I heard that a course named Applied Conflict Transformation Studies was going to be run in Cambodia, by the Alliance for Conflict Transformation. At the time I was involved in a development project in Nepal, supporting the implementing team on matters related to conflict and social inclusion, and needed to build my own skills and knowledge in order to do this work effectively. I could have gone to a European or American university, but my strong belief in local knowledge acquired in a cultural context similar to my own, attracted me to Cambodia. Looking at the contents of the course, I found it to be ideally suited to my requirements, and decided to apply. I had some problems to resolve in order for my study to be accommodated in my project work, but this was done.

Bobichand's story

In the current conflict situation in the Indian state of Manipur, I, along with my colleagues, have been working to understand the conflict in terms of human rights, and to disseminate this thinking. However, we came to see that working within the human rights framework alone could not address the problems arising from the structural violence underlying the conflict. To grasp the complexity of the situation and bring sustainable

peace, I felt we needed the knowledge and skills of conflict transformation, and was looking out for a course in which I could participate without giving up my work.

So I was browsing the internet to find such a course, and came across the website of RTC and information about the ACTS course. I was particularly attracted to a course in Phnom Penh because, although Manipur became part of India in 1949, for centuries it was part of South-East Asia, and we Manipuris feel ourselves to be South-East Asians, culturally and racially. When I received the ACTS application pack, I found the course to be practical and relevant to my situation. And thus ACTS opened my way to conflict transformation studies.

Experiences of ACTS, as reflected in discussions within the group

When in December 2005 we first met together at Pannasastra University in Phnom Penh, each of us was surrounded by new faces. People were busy introducing themselves to each other in English, in a variety of accents. Everyone was trying to pronounce each other's names properly and to remember them. By the end of Module I, the first residential seminar, the ties between colleagues had become so close that on the last day people were almost in tears. Perhaps this was because we all came from similarly difficult situations. Most of us had experienced the turbulence caused by armed conflict, and some had lost family members or close relatives. Many of us had been victimised in some way. Perhaps this is what brought us so close to each other and why we empathised so strongly with each other. This good beginning was not without pain: pain in positive forms, like the need to read various books and articles and to be constantly alert to issues related to conflict and peace in our own contexts. Most of us were enthusiastic, but one or two of us, at the beginning, often felt frustrated, finding themselves unable to grasp the ideas that we discussed in our classes. It was probably the learning methods adopted on the course that made the difference: methods that were familiar to some of us, though not to others. Now, however, with the help of ongoing reflections and continuous efforts to do better, the level of confidence has rocketed.





The course content, in general, was found by our group to be good. However, different students identified different gaps. One felt there should have been more emphasis on the role of civil society in peacebuilding, since all the participants were from this sector, and that less time should have been given to multi-track diplomacy. One of the women participants expressed the view that the course did not give enough attention to gender and conflict – but she felt that this course had helped her to analyse things more deeply than the trainings that she had participated in before, thanks to the variety of conflict theories that had been introduced. Another student, by contrast, had found the multitude of theories hard to digest and would have preferred a greater focus on peacebuilding concepts. Yet another felt that more space should have been given to conflicts that were ongoing, rather than to post-conflict situations.

All of us felt that the journal writing was important, though most of us were not very regular in doing it. It made us analyse and reflect more deeply on the different issues related to conflict and peacebuilding. And literature reviews made us think critically about our own opinions. Perhaps the most important learning was the practice of reflexivity and the Action Research, to which we will devote the next section.

The Action Research component

All the participants considered Action Research to be a vital aspect of the course. Whatever the difficulties we all faced at the beginning, through various processes we have all reached a point where we feel that we can complete our research, as per the course requirements. The most challenging part in this has been to balance our time in pursuing the research with the rest of our responsibilities in the organisations that we are involved in. Even though the action research is also a part of our work, it does require that we put a bit more energy and time into that part than into our other activities.

We regularly presented our research work to each other and our tutors from the second module on, but many of us felt we received no coherent advice on improving it, and were not happy about the tutoring we received. Perhaps this frustration is understandable, given that

we were the first group of students and tutors, all of us on a new journey. In any case, Action Research was described by one of us as ‘the backbone of ACTS’ and another of us identified the idea of research cycles as crucial to it. We all felt that the presentations made in the group about our action research, and the feedback we received from our fellow colleagues, gave us many insights. Sometimes, however, too much reliance on the advice of colleagues sent us off in the wrong direction. In such cases, it would have been better for us to consult our tutors for clarification.

Some of us felt lonely at times, in the face of problems with our research. Why was that? Perhaps we were afraid to consult our tutors, feeling that our own work was sub-standard. Should that have been so? No, not at all. After all, our tutors had shown their readiness to help us through the process of study. So why did we feel shy to formulate our problems? Was it because of our own lack of confidence? Even though by the end of Module 4 we felt we were clear on many issues, including the Action Research, still there was room for improvement, as was shown in our final writing and the comments we received from our ACTS and University teachers.

As some of us reflected together, most of us were familiar with NGO trainings and workshops, and this course was a bit more than that. We remembered that, at the beginning, our tutors and the course coordinator made considerable efforts to help us realise that this was different, and that the course had academic standards that all participants would have to meet. Moreover, those of us who had done research were used to more conventional academic approaches. So in order to grasp what was needed in Action Research, we needed first to unlearn our past; then to have three levels of exploration: ourselves and our own thoughts and actions; the interactions around us; and the broader, more strategic level of action. We agreed that the basics of Action Research need to be well understood from the beginning – not later than Module 2 – and that keeping a journal is one of the basics. A regularly kept journal is a great help for writing up the research, and it should be made clear to students from the outset that this is so, with a clear explanation of how the journal will be used.





Additional reflections from the writers

ACTS gave us all – tutors and participants – the opportunity to build connections and connectedness, and this could be helpful for us all in the future. The practice of reflexivity (the skill and habit of self-awareness and reflecting on our own role) has taught us so much that some of us, at least, are committed to continue in it, even when the course is over. Through the course, some of us have developed new skills – for instance, those for dealing with our anger, frustration and anxieties. All these learnings have been developed through reflection.

Through ACTS, we have learnt more about the world of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Our circle of colleagues has expanded to include fellow peacebuilders from many countries of the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, and we have had the chance to tell them about the situations in our own countries and to learn about theirs. All this has increased our confidence, and we have new knowledge to share with others in conferences and seminars across our region. In comparison with other courses, this one has been intensely practical and relevant.

We have not always met the expectations of our tutors and coordinator, although they were made clear to us before we joined the course. When we discussed this we found that most of us had not paid much attention to the information about the course that was provided in book form. We asked ourselves, ‘Did we read all the course materials before commencing the seminars? Did we follow our task instructions properly and meet our deadlines? Did we give the necessary time to the course?’ Let us be honest now, so that the students who follow us will not suffer from the same mistakes.

Whatever the answers to these questions, it has been our collective reflection that the course not only helped us as individuals, but also helped us to focus better on our work. Some of us have been able to help our work colleagues to understand how our work is related to peacebuilding and conflict transformation and the way in which we can contribute to these processes. Let us recognise what we have learnt as a personal asset, and commit ourselves to investing it for the benefit of the world.





Perspectives from ACTS Balkans (and Middle East*) students

by **MARIJA RADOVANOVIC**, in conversation with **MICHAEL STERNBERG*** and **AJSA HADZIBEGOVIĆ**

(*Michael is one of the second intake of students in what was by this time 'ACTS Balkans and Middle East'. He lives in Israel.)

Several times I started writing this article about our experience of ACTS, and always ended up debating thoughts for and against it and wondering how to go about the task. I wanted to avoid writing anything sterile and predictable, or saying things that have already been said, because the topic I want to present to you is the opposite of all these things.

In order to write something original and to apply the first thing I learnt in ACTS, I decided to start from myself: from my own personal excitements, insights and background, since we describe things as we do because we are part of them and live them.

How did I come to be doing the ACTS course? As a philologist who studied classical languages, history, culture and literature, I lived most of my life thinking about the past, struggling with the amazing cultural and spiritual achievements of ancient times that were mixed with constant wars and violent conflicts. By the time I was deeply involved in my studies, the conflicts were beginning in my ex-country, ex-Yugoslavia, and the only way to survive the catastrophe of that reality was to live in the times that I was studying.

Later, the war widened and the suffering was all around. I was fighting my own little fights, thinking deeply and in all possible ways about how a war can be stopped. And this is how life arranged things. I got involved in some initiatives undertaken by small organisations and started to feel the power of people: their opinions and actions. I found myself working alongside others, believing that change in people, in societies, is possible.

I needed more and more knowledge and skills to guide and inform my actions; to be able to observe reality more acutely; to find the strength in myself to stand up for myself and my values, which are rather different from those common among people of my age, in my country. So, well on in my life, I found myself studying again, doing new things. As you can perhaps imagine, college and learning are the things I do well, but this study was different from courses I had attended before. What I would expect, on such a course, would be to have to attend lectures, to prepare thousands of pages of text to present to the teacher, to end up with a piece of work that would not have to be very original, and to get a diploma.

This course was something completely different. We attended classes through residential seminars, which meant ten days of intensive, interactive work with tutors, a lot of individual and team work, a lot of discussions and sharing in our group. And of course that meant a lot of wrestling with differences: differences in our approaches to topics, differences in our sense of responsibility for meeting our study requirements, differences in coping with problems and, above all, differences between the group members themselves – and at the same time the richness which that brought. Each of us was special in his or her own way, rich with experience, willing to contribute to the work of the group, bringing new qualities of learning, of work and relationship.

And we were struggling with the approach. It was new and, as we experienced, changes and new things are hard to handle. In our group we even joked that it would be much easier if tutors would give us thousands of pages to learn and present and not bother us with thinking, discussing, being critical and, and, and ... with writing a journal! This was the most difficult task to take on board and turn into a habit. We as a group spent hours and hours figuring out why we might need this journal. We would say in my country, 'When you grow up you will find out why' – and this is what happened with us.

While all this was going on, we students were creating a team and developing a sense of belonging: to the group, to ACTS as a learning





community, to all enthusiasts in the world who dream of making this world a better place to live in. And these relationships I found critically important, since the bonds went on getting stronger, as we got to know ourselves and each other better, developed our ability to put ourselves in other's shoes and connect with each other.

These connections are important, since they help individuals living in hi-tech societies, in the world of computers, in greater and greater loneliness, to handle emotions, to get in touch with themselves and with others, and to recognise the real needs of human beings: to love and respect themselves and others. This may be the key requirement for the prevention of violence, oppression, discrimination, genocide and war. I will always think about my country as an example of a place where the bonds of both family ties and friendship transcended nationality, and yet a war was started. This made me question the quality of these relationships, and I realised how much we took for granted, in terms of personal perceptions, in relation to identity and networks; how unaware we were of differences, and how incapable of handling them.

That is my story. Now I want to apply another important learning from Action Research, which is the importance of corroboration, inter-subjectivity, hearing the opinions and perspectives of other people engaging with your own opinion. I shall continue this discussion of the ACTS experience by drawing on a conversation that was held one evening between three of us ACTS students. Our small group consisted of two women from the Balkans and one man from Israel: a perfect reflection of the composition of our two student groups (first and second years).

A three- way conversation

Michael Sternberg thought ACTS was different from any other trainings and seminars we might have had the chance to attend in our different countries. The difference was that we had the opportunity to get away from our daily setting and concentrate on ourselves. He saw being part of the ACTS course as different from being 'at university'. It was an intense

and deep process, strongly felt but largely invisible, going on within each one of us; an opportunity to meet other people, hear different stories, and reflect on our personal work. And the study we did gave us, as students, the opportunity to reach a deeper layer of learning and to apply it in our work. He said that the process helped us to be more open in our approach to the things we did, to be more flexible, and to observe different approaches and ways of doing things. It gave us a new perspective. Our tutors helped us to create a learning process, including the opportunity to learn from each other through 'learning groups', team work, and the pooling of individual contributions in the presentation of certain topics.

Michael's view was that, like all those who are new to something and taking their first steps, we were not sure that tutors were convinced of the ability of our group to learn. Journal tasks and strict deadlines for essays were, for us 'new-born' students, an opportunity for checking boundaries. And he expressed our shared opinion that, since in general none of us paid enough attention to emotions, developing emotional abilities should be given more space in our work.

Ajsa Hadzibegovic saw ACTS as an opportunity to connect theory and practice, and to create a conceptual framework for the methods and tools that we use. It was designed to do this, and in this way it was responding to the needs of student practitioners. The process of studying was complex. It involved looking deep into one's own experiences and practice, while at the same time researching and learning about theories. It involved the exchange of arguments in our social time, and produced illuminating moments in our working groups. The composition of the student groups in this course was very important, and provided, in itself, the opportunity to learn from different experiences, ways of thinking, and approaches to conflict.

In ACTS, Ajsa said, we learned not to be afraid of big words and theories. We were encouraged to put our own findings on paper and to share our expertise from our work context, through the critique of existing theories and the creation of new ones. In this way,





a new dimension was added to our work experience and to our everyday efforts to make our work more relevant. This action-based knowledge was then amplified, as we learned how to share the findings of our action research with other practitioners working in similar conditions, and to do it in a structured and understandable way. However, for her there remained a question about the extent to which practitioners were willing and able to learn from findings that came from the experiences of others.

We agreed that it was important not to forget that we were all part of a learning organisation, since both ACTS itself and its students were learning. The current gap in the learning relationship should be turned to our advantage and used as an opportunity to establish more solid cooperation between ACTS and its students, especially in the intervals between one module and the next, and when students finished the course.

All three of us said that the most important result we wanted to see from this course was the generation of responsibility, both towards ourselves and towards others. This would be reflected in the continuation of own personal missions, and at the same time by the unity of our philosophy and our approach to work and to life. We wanted to see an ongoing network of exceptional people from the field of conflict transformation: first those who were the creators and brains of ACTS, and then all ACTS' colleagues and students.

In our view, ACTS is about sharing knowledge, values, and experiences. It should grow into a spiritual, intellectual and political home, where people stay in touch. With a diversity of people coming from all over the world, we have a shared identity. The capacities and size of this community, its strength and resilience, we still cannot anticipate – but we can hope.





ACTS Asia: The tutors' experience

by **SOTH PLAI NGARM** from Cambodia, **L. JA NAN** from Myanmar, **MONICA ALFRED** from Sri Lanka, and **CHARLITO MANLUPIG** from the Philippines

This is a record of the reflections of ACTS tutors in the Asia region. These reflections were made at a certain moment during the course, when there were already two groups of students studying. Those in the second intake were in their first year and had reached the second module, while the first group had reached their fifth. The difference between the two groups, in terms of timeframe and group dynamics, will be part of this reflection, along with the views of each of the contributing tutors. These tutors are themselves peace workers, with diverse backgrounds and extensive experience of working in the field, as staff members of organisations in their own countries.

These reflections will be presented in four sections. The first will look at ACTS' aims and objectives, the second at course content, the third at the challenges and benefits for tutors of working on this course, and the fourth at the course's wider impact.

Aims and objectives of ACTS

The ACTS course aims to provide an accessible, flexible opportunity for advanced, practical learning in conflict transformation, for people who want to be more effective in contributing to constructive change in their own situation. The course also aims to generate and disseminate new knowledge, theories and insights relevant to work for peace and justice, in the region and beyond, and to challenge and strengthen existing work by deepening the capacity of practitioners, and through them their organisations and networks, for complex analysis and strategic activity at all levels. With these particular aims, the course can be seen as uniquely relevant to the goal of furthering the effectiveness of the peacebuilding and conflict transformation community.

Course content

Each module has its own theoretical content. In general, the themes are well connected, with a good, logical flow from one module to another. We tutors have also brought in additional but relevant theories that are not contained within the thematic framework. It would, however, be better if those theories were included in the course content from the start, since that would help maintain consistency, both on the 'delivery' side and for the recipients.

Within the current time frame, even without the inclusion of any new material, class contact can cover the course's subject matter only at an introductory level. It is vital therefore that the students supplement the theory that is introduced by exploring further relevant literature themselves. Greater creativity on the part of the tutors might help to deepen conceptual understanding. The main challenge for them, however, is to find ways, within the two weeks available for each module, to encourage the students to put more effort into exploring the wider literature on the topics addressed, in order to strengthen their theoretical understanding.

The presence of an international tutor at each module, whose expertise is particularly relevant to that module's theme, is very helpful. That person can bring solid experience and grounded knowledge that helps concretise the module, giving clear guidance to help students intensify their personal study within and between modules. Both the regional tutors and students learn new ideas and concepts, approaches and examples. International tutors also bring a fresh dynamic to the class, coming as they do not only from different contexts but also from different cultures and with different academic backgrounds. And as well as adding to our knowledge and understanding, they maintain our sense of connectedness to other continents and to the global programme of ACTS.

Action Research is seen as the central component of ACTS, and needs to be developed consistently – both sequentially, step by step, from the beginning to the end of the course, and horizontally, across the team of regional and international tutors. The tutors need capacity-building and specialisation in Action Research





so that they can be more helpful to the students. And there needs to be a clear, common understanding between regional tutors and the international expert whose direction the students are to follow.

Challenges and benefits for tutors

One basic challenge facing all tutors is to encourage students to develop good habits in regular journal writing. Students also raised some specific questions about journals – for instance, the difference between journaling and keeping a diary. Such questions point to more fundamental ones about the purpose of journal entries and their use in writing up their action research. We would like to be able to convey this clearly so that the students are able to establish this practice, with clarity and confidence, from the beginning of the course.

Tutoring on the ACTS course is not just about teaching, it is also about journeying together with the students through the course. We see it as part of our task to create a relationship of trust with the students, both through class time and through wider interaction with them. Not only do we live close to each other throughout the seminar; we also have the chance to engage more with each other through practical work and collaboration in the field.

The work of the tutors is a team effort, and it takes time to plan for the seminar weeks (unlike other types of university teaching where the same person is responsible for designing the course syllabus and for the day-to-day teaching plan). This teamwork requires sensitivity to the needs of others. It is a more exhausting process because each has to consider what other colleagues feel and think, in order to enable the team to be well prepared before teaching.

But although the team approach is not without its costs and anxieties, it has many benefits. In the words of one tutor:

“I feel more secure and confident in the class, knowing that I have other colleagues to back me up. There is a sharing of responsibility among the tutors. It gives me an opportunity to learn new concepts from colleagues and students. It motivates me to learn more.”

Since we tutor students on different topics in every module, each tutor has the opportunity to draw on and express her or his own strengths, interests, and particular knowledge in relation to each. At the same time the process enables us to extend our own knowledge and empowers, encourages, and re-energises us. For instance, we may be worried about the situation in our own country but then be re-inspired by hearing about another person’s experience in our region.

Wider impact

Our involvement as tutors in this MA course has an impact not only on us but on others with whom we work, in the world outside. It creates an entry point for other staff members in our organisation to join it as students, so providing an opportunity for the organisation to become more confident about the work it is doing.

The direct, regular involvement we tutors have in our work on the one hand and the course on the other, has brought doing and learning closer together. The insights gained from discussions and reflections during our tutoring sometimes influence judgments we are having to make at the time, and on consequent actions that have a direct impact at project level, and, through those projects, on the communities we serve. Tutors, like students, carry the ACTS message to their colleagues, their work, and their training.





ACTS Balkans: The tutors' experience

by ABDULLAH FERIZI, VESNA MATOVIC,
VOJISLAVA TOMIC, and SIMON FISHER

“ You can teach a student a lesson for a day; but if you can teach him to learn by creating curiosity, he will continue the learning process as long as he lives.”

Clay P. Bedford

We find ourselves engaged in the field of peacebuilding for various reasons and from different motivations: we are not satisfied with the state of affairs where we live; we are not satisfied with the state of affairs where others live; we find objectionable inequalities among humankind; we want to build more human-friendly societies; we want to introduce Conflict Transformation as an approach to handling conflicts in a way that it is beneficial for all.

With these ideas in our minds, we engage ourselves in amateur attempts to mobilise people around us, to spread a message, to gain more knowledge and skills for doing our work better, to produce change faster.

Suddenly, we realise that there is a mass of people all around the world engaged in the same undertaking, with the same values and with huge experience in this field. How do we learn from them? By asking them? We can't actually reach everyone in this world engaged in peacebuilding and ask them to tell us their experience! But we can bring some of them together and work to draw the learning from their experiences, in a process that will make their own work more effective and provide new insights for the rest of us. That is what ACTS is about.

This is the moment when the struggle and the questions begin for the ACTS tutors: how can we design a process that is attractive enough to motivate each student? How do we plan a programme with an outcome that is beneficial for them and for other peacebuilders? And how can we ensure this programme meets the criteria for academic work?

And here we are, with two years of experience in tutoring on an ACTS course. Did we find answers to our initial questions? Did new questions arise? What have we learned?

Well, one central issue that has crystallised is the motivation of practitioners for engagement, both in ACTS and in their own work. It has become clear that what generates the desire for learning is the will for change. And this learning applies to us as tutors, too. We are practitioners ourselves, and the challenge for us is to deal with, combine, and balance both teaching and learning. Furthermore, we all have to ask ourselves the question, 'How does being a practitioner express itself in an academic course, and how does engagement in academic studies express itself in our practice?' There still remain a lot of questions and issues, and all of us who have been tutors in this first phase will admit that we have definitely had to learn from the mistakes as well as the successes. So, in our debriefing notes, even very obvious things like 'Need for one day off!' appeared, because in the struggle to do all this for the first time, when there was so much to think about, even some really basic and familiar things were forgotten.

But there are learning points, too, among those comments: points that could be helpful to us in our future tutoring work, or to others who have yet to join us on the journey of facilitating the learning; points that give us food for thought, open questions that unlock new horizons of thinking and developing. Clay P. Bedford was right in saying that the most important thing for students to learn is curiosity, and we are all students. That is why questions are vital for us – even when they challenge the fundamentals of what we are doing.

And, after two years of tutoring on the ACTS course, even if we cannot say to possible new recruits to this adventure in erudition, 'Here are some of the learnings for you to digest', we certainly can say, 'Here are some of the issues for you to think about'. For ACTS tutors there are a range of issues to think about and deal with, which can be summarised under two headings:





The fundamental need to create an effective, complementary and self-supporting tutor team

Being pioneers in doing what we do, from time to time we feel isolated, with not much support or understanding from outside. Therefore it is of crucial importance for ACTS tutors to know that their fellow-tutors are there, to fill in the missing bits, to provide support and courage, and to help each other improve their performance.

Fine-tuning, with guest lecturers, resource people and academic colleagues, a common understanding of the very aim of a specific session (or the whole course)

The common language and values developed within the tutor team are not necessarily easily understood or accepted by the wider group of people included in the process of teaching and learning. If they want to achieve the goals set for the course and for particular sessions, ACTS tutors need to make sure that the input given by 'outsiders' is in line with the learning objectives and, as far as possible, with the learning process of each student.

So, what keeps ACTS alive? Certainly the will to engage with these issues, and openness to identify and face new obstacles; but perhaps, most of all, the perpetual seeking to bring about social and political change, on various levels and in different dimensions. One thing is certain: we do not have all the answers and must be content with making progress, in this attempt to contribute to the strengthening of human society.







Asia students and their research

This section introduces the research of two of the students from Asia, and presents an overview of all of the students' work.

TWO

Integration of spirituality with community development for peace

by **BIJAYANANDA SINGH**

Bijayananda Singh (Bijay) leads an organisation called Solidarity For Developing Communities (SFDC), which works in the state of Orissa with those most marginalised in India: Dalits (the 'untouchable' caste from which Bijay comes) and Adivasis (indigenous or 'tribal' people). Adivasis are the people most often displaced by different development projects, and suffer from the breaking down of socio-economic safety nets. Dalits, being considered as impure and polluting, face social and physical segregation, and are excluded from social rights, property rights and sources of livelihood. SFDC works to promote the human rights of these two groups, to eliminate all kinds of caste-based discrimination, and to build sustainable peace between Dalits and Adivasis, who are often in conflict over scarce resources.

Bijay's Action Research was done in and for the Human Harmoniser Programme (HHP) initiated by SFDC in 2003, with the objective of providing higher education to Adivasi and Dalit students from areas of tension and conflict, bringing them together in a residential setting. The programme is designed to develop their physical, mental and spiritual well-being, so that they become resources in their own communities and peace-builders between them. Bijay's research focus was on the integration of spiritual growth activities into this programme, and on the impact that this would have. His hope was that this additional dimension would enhance the programme's effectiveness. Through his research, he found that its impact on academic study was marked and positive, and that the spiritual growth activities were beneficial for both staff and students.

Action Research was integral to our experience of ACTS, from the first week of our enrolment and a 'mini-research' task, until the end of the course and the completion of our 'real' assignment of a fully-fledged Action Research project. In this essay I will discuss briefly what my research entailed, the process it involved, what I learned, and how the research is benefiting me and my organisation.

What my research entailed

The focus of my research was 'The Integration of Spirituality with Community Development for Peace' within the two conflicting communities of Adivasis and Dalits. Adivasis are the 'tribal' people and Dalits are the 'untouchable' caste. These two communities are the most marginalised, wherever they live in India, but in the project area of the NGO I am leading at this moment, Solidarity For Developing Communities (SFDC), these two communities form the majority. The area in question in Orissa is high up in the hills (3,500 feet above sea-level). It has very little cultivable land, and this is a source of conflict between the two groups, who speak different languages and have different religious traditions.

SFDC is guided in its work by an 'integrated community development approach'. There are three aspects to its mandate: community development, peace-building, and the nurture of spirituality. As a leader of this NGO I took the opportunity of being an ACTS student to satisfy my curiosity about how to integrate spirituality into community-based and institution-based programmes. Since the scope of my Action Research was necessarily limited, I focused on just one of SFDC's programmes, looking at our work among students pursuing higher education.

My research questions were focused at three levels: on myself and my own learning and development; then on my action with colleagues and what we





could learn for our collective benefit; and finally on ways in which our activities and what we learned from them could be of use to others.

1. The 'me' level question was: 'In what ways am I able to build the capacity of my colleagues for better integration of spiritual growth activities within community development interventions for peace?'
2. The 'us' level question was: 'How are my colleagues and I able to link spiritual growth with the growth of community building and peace, within the two conflicting communities?'
3. In relation to the broader field within which I work, the question was: 'How can this way of integrating spiritual growth activities with community development for peace help a new approach for the NGO sector to emerge?'

This research was carried out over little more than one academic year.

My research process

The purpose of this Action Research was to learn about research methods, as well as to develop useful knowledge about our day-to-day activities. For this reason, throughout my research I tried to engage with the different facets of the Action Research methodology: research design, making questionnaires, collecting data, recording information, selecting information for analysis and reflection, writing reflective journals, understanding what constitutes subjectivity, inter-subjectivity in the reflection process, and what corroboration is, and how to include all these in the writing up of my research.

Throughout my research I kept in mind the words of Roy O'Brien¹ (1998, p. 21):

'Action research ...aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to further the goals of social science simultaneously. Thus, there is a dual commitment in action research to study a system and concurrently to collaborate with members of the system in changing it in what

is together regarded as a desirable direction. Accomplishing this twin goal requires the active collaboration of researcher and client, and thus it stresses the importance of co-learning as a primary aspect of the research process.'

I also kept in mind the key to Action Research methodology: its cyclical pattern of action, reflection, and action.

The 'actions' or activities for this research were of seven different types.

1. With my colleagues and the students in the 'Human Harmonisers' programme, I conducted three workshops on the three broad concepts of my research – community development, peace-building, and spirituality. These concepts are very broad and abstract, and the workshops helped me to construct working definitions of them to continue the research.
2. Our next action was to introduce what I called Satsang ('Friends in Truth'). This was a continuous reflection process with my colleagues, carried out on a daily basis and based on the reading of quotations published in the 'Sacred Space' column of a daily newspaper.
3. Another activity we introduced was 'Meditation'. We all meditated twice a day, and I observed how this affected us all as we worked to introduce a spiritual dimension to what we were doing.
4. Our next action was to introduce 'Common Worship', in which we composed a prayer with each other's help and then prayed together. I observed, with others, the evolutionary aspects of our common prayers.
5. Yet another activity we introduced was 'Spiritual Reading', which we carried out every day. I observed how this process affected the students during and after the readings.
6. We also began 'Weekly Reflections' within the student group, on a chosen topic.
7. Last but by no means least was the journal writing done by the students and myself. This practice nourished both my Action Research and me as a person.





While I was pursuing these activities I was regularly reading and reviewing what I read. All the literature that came to hand in this remote location where I was working helped me to grow as a researcher. I devoted a chapter of my final writing to a literature review, in which I looked at spirituality from different points of view: spirituality as a form of intelligence; spirituality and religion; spirituality and social justice; spirituality and community development; and spirituality and conflict transformation.

The reflections I recorded as I wrote up my research consisted mainly of my own personal reflections, recorded in my daily journal. However, I regularly consulted my colleagues in SFDC, my fellow students in ACTS and my tutors, asking for their reflections and feedback. These reflections became the source of the insights and learning that I was able to apply immediately in my Action Research, so continuing to increase the effectiveness of the various activities. This action-reflection-action process was sustained through all the seven actions mentioned above, until I reached the point of writing up my Action Research. It was a learning experience from start to finish.

What I learned from my Action Research

My learning came at many levels, and some of it was unexpected.

- I learned that working definitions are necessary when the concepts underpinning a particular process of Action Research are broad and abstract – in this case spirituality, community development, and external and internal peace. The working definitions I was able to formulate through the workshops gave me a handle on the subtleties and nuances of these abstract concepts.
- In SFDC we consider spirituality, community development, and peace as the three main pillars of our activities. However, we agree that these three components should have equal emphasis and that each strengthens the other. Through my research I learned that the integration of spirituality is both possible and necessary.
- However, I came to realise, unexpectedly, that before integration can happen, integrity of thought and action is required of the person(s) integrating these three concepts. Without such integrity the whole effort will be futile, because Action Research, unlike more conventional academic research, involves the self.
- I recognised that spirituality, community feeling and peacefulness are not the most immediate needs, and might be seen as non-essential. People live their lives without them. And I came to see that spiritual integration, or for that matter the integration of anything new into an existing programme, must protect and contribute to its original purpose. For example, the purpose of our Human Harmonisers programme is education, and the immediate need of the students is to study well and get good marks in class. In the course of this Action Research some of them said to me ‘Why don’t you give more emphasis to the students’ studies and put less stress on spirituality?’. But it was my conviction that spiritual growth is required for the more effective achievement of students’ study needs – and indeed this proved to be so. For this they needed capacities for concentration, reading, deliberation and reflection. They also needed writing skills. So all the activities of my Action Research – Workshops, Meditation, Spiritual Reading, Weekly Reflection and Journal Writing – were designed to be helpful in meeting these immediate needs of the students. At the end of the analysis we could all see that among these equally able students, studying together in the same conditions, those who participated more fully in the spirituality integration activities got better results in their final college tests than those who did not take much of a part in the spiritual growth activities.
- My convictions about what I had learned from my Action Research were strengthened when another study² corroborated my observations with similar findings: that academic performance can be enhanced if spirituality is integrated within the student community. However, these findings are not conclusive. Further research will be needed before the case for the integration

2. ‘Spirituality and academic performance among African American college students’ by Katrina L. Walker and Vicki Dixon of East Carolina University, published in *The Journal of Black Psychology*, Vol. 28, No-2, 107 – 121 (2002).





of spirituality into education is accepted within the mainstream academic world.

- This research also suggested that community-building is effective where spiritual values are strong. My colleagues' and my own expectations were validated, in that we saw that students from two conflicting communities could live in peace more easily if spiritual values like love, compassion, understanding, mutual help and so on were integrated into their daily living.
- Last but not least, I found that those who implemented activities for the integration of spirituality were also positively affected, with changes being brought about in their lives. I noticed an increase in staff solidarity within SFDC.

My learning and SFDC's future work

Encouraged by the results and experience of this Action Research, we in SFDC are determined to go on integrating spirituality into all our activities. We believe that our efforts will help the emergence of a new approach to community development and peace building in the NGO sector. We have already taken our own next step in this direction. We have just laid the foundation stone of what we have named the KarunaShanti Ashram – the Ashram for Compassionate Peace.





Integrating peacebuilding into development work: The vital role of influencing

by TULASI R. NEPAL

*Tulasi was born into a very poor but 'high caste' Hindu family; he found himself challenging his 'inborn-perceptions of fatalism'. By his early thirties he was involved in the community development field, and came to understand that under-development and poverty are created by human beings, and that the roots of the conflict in Nepal are in socio-cultural, economic and political inequalities and bad governance. His peace work has included training for government employees, for military, police, business, and media personnel, and work done for civil society organisations, documenting existing peacebuilding practices in Nepal and reflecting on the practices and contributions of peace-promoting groups. He has worked to advance his agency's approach from one of working **in** conflict **on** development, to one of working **on** conflict **through** development.*

In his research Tulasi looked at ways of enabling project managers to integrate peacebuilding components into development projects, through conflict-sensitive programme management and by addressing root causes of conflict by enhancing the livelihoods of socially and geographically excluded communities. He tracked his progress and discovered that inclusive processes facilitated acceptance of this new focus. He found that conceptual clarity was central to enabling a shift in approach, and that changing situations of conflict required all development projects to be flexible, innovative and creative.

In this article, I will briefly outline the idea of my action research: how it arose and evolved. Then I will summarise the process that I followed in carrying out the research. And finally I will reflect on the learning that I gathered during the whole process, from the beginning until the final write-up.

The evolution of my research idea and the scope of its focus

Initially I had chosen as my title, 'How an infrastructure project can contribute to peacebuilding'. I chose this topic simply because at that time I was involved with an infrastructure project, and my country, Nepal, was in a state of armed conflict. My task in the project was to support my work team in issues related to conflict and social organisation.

However, as I began to explore this with colleagues, I faced resistance from many quarters, ranging from my immediate subordinates to the top management. As I wrote in my journal:

'Despite having been introduced to some ways of including a peacebuilding component in their work, traditional project workers are reluctant, for many reasons, to come out clearly in favour of the idea of peacebuilding.'

This made me think seriously about why this was so, and as the ACTS course was progressing to its subsequent modules, I realised that although integrating peacebuilding components into a development project was the goal of my work, unless I could influence my work team it would be almost impossible to achieve that goal. So I decided that what I should be exploring was different, effective ways of influencing colleagues, and I changed my research topic to 'How to influence colleagues in a development project to integrate peacebuilding components into their regular programme activities'.

Both my review of relevant literature and what I had learned from fellow practitioners in the Asia region (particularly from Mindanao in the Philippines) confirmed my belief that development projects can indeed contribute towards peacebuilding, when this is a conscious intention. Such projects already have peacebuilding components, but this is not necessarily understood by the staff. In my case, the fact that the project was operational even during the armed conflict boosted my belief that it could contribute to peacebuilding at the local level, so long as the peacebuilding components were fully integrated – built in.





This thinking led me to formulate the following hypotheses:

- Development projects can contribute to peacebuilding if this is done consciously and as a part of regular activities.
- For this to happen, people working in the project need conceptual clarity.
- To bring clarity among team members, they need to be influenced properly, by appropriate means.

The process of my action and research

To start with, I shared my concept with the person in charge of my project, in order to ensure that it conformed to organisational mandates. This helped me to re-write the concept of the research to make it compatible with the organisation's vision. As I have indicated, I expected it would then be easily accepted by the project working team, but this was not so; and I came up with the idea of sharing the concept with the project team through meetings, workshops and field visits, in a way that would appreciate their practical knowledge, using the kind of elicitive approach suggested by Lederach³.

I redesigned the process, taking one step at a time. First I consulted the project team leaders at regional meetings. These consultations were in three different regions. In total I consulted six project leaders. Still, things did not move properly. The reason for this was that the work teams at field level were not involved in the regional meeting. So I proposed holding one workshop for all of them, involving the team leaders together with the field teams. This workshop dealt with some of the conceptual issues, giving due recognition to the experience that the field teams had gathered during the armed conflict. Later, when the workshop participants analysed the context of that time, they recognised that factors that triggered conflict at a local level could seriously hamper the achievement of project goals. This exercise helped all of us to map the nexus between conflict and peace and development work. Once we could see this nexus, it was easier to identify activities to integrate peacebuilding components.

It took almost a year to complete these workshops. I summarised the group reflections at the end of the workshop in my journal:

'Now as we see a clear link between conflict and peace and development work, we realize we cannot make progress with development objectives unless we give due attention to peacebuilding. For integrating peacebuilding components into our regular programme activities, the conceptual clarity that we acquired in this workshop helped us a lot. We feel we don't need to go outside development work; rather we can integrate a peacebuilding approach within the existing project logical framework.'

This process of negotiations, regional meetings and workshops constituted the action through which I carried out my research, following the pattern of action-reflection-action cycles. I kept a journal of each event, reflecting on the things I was noticing and what they meant for me, for my community of colleagues, and for my field.

From time to time I returned to the literature available to me, to develop my thinking, trying to make it locally applicable. Following the elicitive model in the meetings and workshops made it easier for me to enable other people to understand what peacebuilding and conflict transformation are, as I reflected in my journal:

'The very people that were so resistant in the beginning are now pushing harder than I am. What brought about this miracle? It seems to me that in the first place it was the conceptual clarity. Secondly, but equally importantly, it was the step-by-step process that we followed together. Terms that describe specific things, such as 'harmony creation' and 'reconciliation', were very much more acceptable than the general term, 'peacebuilding'.'

Also, in contrast with the way it was at the beginning, I was spending time with the project implementation team and constantly available to support them at the field level. My presence helped them to see the way peacebuilding activities linked with the project's existing logical framework.



3. Lederach, J.P. 1995. Preparing for peace: Conflict transformation across cultures. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, pp. 55-62.



This linkage became very useful in keeping the components built into the process. This was a relief to all of us because there would be no work over and above the usual project work.

Further, our willingness to learn from the communities and their practices on reconciliation and peacebuilding paved the way to integrate the community practices into the project processes to promote peacebuilding at the community level. At the same time we were concerned to see whether such practices maintained a 'rights' perspective and promoted 'equity'. We wanted to ensure that the Human Rights Based Approach went hand-in-hand with the reconciliatory process. After reflection with the team I wrote as follows in my journal:

'We need to discover how to realize the Human Rights Based Approach and yet to maintain the reconciliation and harmony components of our work at the community level. Though many cross-cutting issues, such as poverty alleviation, gender balance, HRBA and the like, are very much inter-linked with the peacebuilding approach, a deliberate and conscious effort is needed to understand all these and to see them as a mosaic, not in isolation.'

Lessons learnt

During this exploration, the major learning for me was that the person responsible for introducing new ideas must be clear from the very beginning about the topic to be introduced. However, the flexibility to adopt a step-by-step approach to the learning process must also be considered. Being rigid does not help to create ownership at all levels. This insight came to me with the help of Heron⁴, whose approach, based on the idea of 'extended epistemology', suggests giving due acknowledgement to the practical knowledge of practitioners (in my case the project team).

Action Research is a long process. It requires various levels of interaction and interface. The process needs to be well thought-out and calls for a high level of attention. It is only when all the actors involved in the exploration feel confident about the process that we can expect them to take ownership of the outcome, so ensuring the application of the ideas that have been introduced.

I have concluded that there is no single way of influencing people, no magic wand. People have tried various ways, but none of them could be claimed as universally acceptable and effective. In situations like mine it is likely to be a combination of things that will give a high probability of effective influence – choosing the right approach, for example the participatory approach; finding the most suitable tools and adapting them to fit the local context; and combining propositional knowledge with experiential and practical knowledge, based in the local culture and context.

4. Heron J. 1981. 'Philosophical basis for a new paradigm'. In P. Reason & J. Rowan (eds), *Human inquiry: A sourcebook of new paradigm research*. Chichester, John Wiley, UK.





Overview of Asia students and their research

The first student group in ACTS Asia included two students from India, five from Cambodia, one from Aotearoa New Zealand (living in Cambodia), two from Nepal, one from Bangladesh, and three from Myanmar. Sadly, for their own safety, these last three will not be listed and their work and its context will not be described.

India

BOBICHAND MEITEI RAJKUMAR – Ethnic conflict in Manipur and its transformation: Exploring ways of influencing ethnic armed group leaders and civil society leaders.

Bobichand Meitei Rajkumar works with Human Rights Alert in Manipur, North-East India, on programmes undertaken in grass roots communities to transform ethnic tensions and conflicts. The conflict among different ethnic communities in Manipur is linked with the Manipur-India conflict, the roots of which lie in the structural violence that is manifest in the marginalisation of the region since the 1950s. This research is based on the assumption that when the number of people committed to conflict transformation and to peaceful coexistence reaches a 'critical mass', corresponding changes in the political, social and economic structure may be possible.

In his research Bobichand explored strategies for transforming the ethnic conflict in Manipur by influencing the leaders of civil society organisations and armed groups, in terms of deepening their understanding and analysis, in order to develop more effective strategies to reduce the ethnic violence. He found that it was possible to enable people in the different groups to recognise the links between their internal conflict and the conflict between Manipur and India, and to understand that the non-fulfilment of basic human needs, particularly those of the hill tribes, is the root cause of both. With this analysis, civil society organisations can reach out to both ordinary people and to ethnic armed groups to influence their mindset, attitude, and behaviour.

Cambodia

NAO SOK – Experiences and reflections on effective values-based training.

Nao Sok works with Church World Service in Cambodia. He has 11 years of experience as an adult education trainer, working in community development, peacebuilding and conflict resolution. He viewed the action research process as a way to develop himself as a trainer, exploring the way in which his personal history and development influenced his training style.

In his research Sok tracked the evolution of his understanding that the ultimate role of a trainer is to create a space where participants can learn from one another and discover their full potential as human beings. Looking deeply into the values he upholds in his own life, Sok explored how 'values-based training' changes people's perceptions, values and attitudes, and alters their way of responding to the problems around them, enabling them to do things they believed were impossible. He reached the view that one of the most important aspects of this kind of values-based training is that, by helping to build participants' self-esteem, it enables them to take responsibility for their own lives and circumstances.

HUY ROMDUOL – The process of restructuring in a centre for peace training.

Huy Romduol has for the last six years been a trainer at the Centre for Peace, part of the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI), and has a background in working to empower poor communities. The focus of her research was the effectiveness of their training course in engaging participants from different backgrounds and with varying positions, perceptions and beliefs, and improving their capacities for addressing conflict. Her aim was to achieve greater effectiveness through what she learned from this study.

Romduol reviewed the evolution of the training syllabus and the impact of training undertaken by CDRI to date, exploring its different elements. Her





study outlined developments and lessons learned from six years of training carried out with a range of Cambodian actors, including local government officials, the security forces, international and local organisations, labour unions, and religious leaders. 'Best practices' that she identified include the translation of 'handouts' into the Khmer language and their adaptation to emphasise concepts most applicable in the Cambodian context, along with the development of local case studies and the use of creative facilitation skills.

NGANN THANAK – Intra-organisational conflict management training: The context of civil society in Cambodia.

Ngann Thanak has worked with the Alliance for Conflict Transformation, a Cambodian NGO founded in 2005 to work on inter-ethnic peacebuilding in Cambodia. He has conducted training for ACT over almost three years, focused largely on testing 'workplace self-help mediation training' to assist NGOs in handling their internal problems. His research was aimed at building understanding of the 'conflict culture' within Cambodian civil society organisations and of the conflict management skills that can promote peace within the workplace.

Several social change organisations in Cambodia have experienced habitual conflicts, which are the legacy of prolonged instability and are threaded with deep-seated insecurity. In his research Ngann reflected on his own experience of different organisational cultures and systems, and specifically how staff at different levels in organisations found ways of acting as mediators with different conflict management styles.

MEAS SOKEO – A new generation of peacebuilders? The role of inter-ethnic peace camps.

Meas Sokeo, like Ngann Thanak, works for the Alliance for Conflict Transformation. His research was linked to ACT's Nationalism and Ethnic Identity project. Cambodia is a multi-ethnic country, whose ethnic groups include Khmer (95%), Vietnamese, Chinese, Cham (Muslim-Cham), Thai, Khmer Kampuchea

Krom (Vietnamese citizens of Cambodian descent), and several hill-tribes (Khmer Leou). Ethnicity issues are politically contentious, and there appear to be rising levels of ethnically motivated violence and discrimination in Cambodian society. Ethnic, racial and religious tensions are complicated by factors such as historical grievances, politicisation of ethnic divisions, economic conditions, education, and social policies, combined with personal experiences, histories and collective memories from the past.

In his research Sokeo explored ways of engaging people from different ethnic backgrounds in social interaction at 'Inter-Ethnic Peace Camps', with a view to reducing inter-ethnic prejudice. Focal issues and questions he brought to his exploration included good practice and skills in training for multicultural peacebuilding; ways to convince and attract divided ethnic groups to become connectors; and attitudinal and behavioural changes in participants and their effectiveness for the prevention and transformation of ethnic conflict.

PRAK SOKHANY – My peacemaking story.

Sokhany leads an organisation called Australian Catholic Relief in Cambodia. She designs and implements training and facilitation programmes that focus on improving women's rights, raising awareness on gender issues, and reducing domestic violence. Through this training, designed to strengthen social networks that can rescue women from domestic violence, she has been able to form many peace groups in the provinces. Challenges she faces in her work include the facts that most Cambodians do not recognise women's role in society; that many Cambodian women do not stand up for themselves and show that they are able to work as well as men; and that violence and discrimination against women are still happening every day in Cambodia.

Sokhany sees her role to act as a catalyst and to encourage other women to learn how to deal with these issues. In her research she reviewed her experiences and achievements, and the challenges faced in building a culture of peace and gender equity in Cambodia.





Aotearoa New Zealand and Cambodia

PADDY NOBLE – Theological issues of gender differences pertaining to indigenous gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender peoples (GLBT), and the relevance of these issues to peacebuilding.

Paddy Noble works as the Senior Advisor for the Cambodian Student Christian Mission (CSCM). In his research he explored his own sexuality as a gay Maori Christian man, within the context of theological debates and discourse (particularly of Christian conservatism) and of the experience of indigenous Maori culture and society in Aotearoa New Zealand. He also explored his need to engage openly and explicitly with the issues pertaining to GLBT peoples in the Cambodian context.

He ‘reclaimed and remembered’ the stories of people who were once an integral part of indigenous societies, known as the shamans, care givers, warriors, healers, spiritual conduits, and entertainers of their respected societies. His aim was to create awareness and acceptance through the exploration of these cultural traditions, religious beliefs and understandings relating to gender and sexuality, and to engage and challenge oppressive structures and theology, and in so doing to contribute to a more inclusive and accepting religious institution.

Nepal

BOGATI KRISHNA BAHADUR (SILAS) – Working for the effective return of internally displaced people (IDP) in Nepal.

Silas works for Caritas Nepal, assisting in the return and reintegration of conflict-affected IDPs. Born into a Nepali middle-class Hindu family whose main livelihood is agriculture, he joined the Catholic Church before working for Caritas. The ten-year Maoist conflict in Nepal began on 13th February 1996, and is estimated to have claimed over 14,000 lives and displaced roughly 200,000 people.

In his Action Research Silas explored effective strategies for facilitating the dignified and safe return of IDPs. He looked at the factors that motivate people to make the decision to return, and described his attempts to develop a common framework to guide coordination among different stakeholders. Through the process of his research he examined strategies such as strengthening the government’s role in providing assistance to IDPs, promoting a rights-based perspective on the return process, and encouraging inter-agency coordination.

Bangladesh

ALI AHMED KHANDKAR – Helping women to address their exclusion from equal participation in the Union Parishad in Bangladesh.

Ali Ahmed Khandkar is the Technical Coordinator of the Democratic Local Governance Program (DLGP) of USAID in Bangladesh, which builds the capacity of the lowest tier of local government, the Union Parishad (UP). He began by setting out the current reality, that gender relations in rural Bangladesh are deeply rooted in its traditional cultural and religious norms and practices, enforced by the dominant nature of patriarchy. Although women are increasingly being drawn beyond the family sphere by the interventions of development organisations, this external participation is often not culturally accepted. Although the dominant patriarchy can do little to prevent it, given the prevailing socio-economic realities, the hidden conflict remains.

In his research Ali’s explored the tensions between women members of the Union Parishad and their male counterparts. He analysed patterns reinforcing their exclusion, including the exploitation of legal loop-holes and traditionally constructed gender roles, and tested and reflected on approaches to facilitate women’s enhanced participation. In his findings he emphasised the importance of ‘self-organising’ and negotiating skills to increase women’s power, and the role of communities in providing support for women. His argument was that social change will be possible only if institutions change, and that the effective participation of women will be the key to this, as well as its outcome.





Balkans students and their research

THREE

This section introduces the research of two of the students from the Balkans, and presents an overview of all of the students' work.

Gender awareness in dealing with the past

by **ZORICA TRIFUNOVIC**

Zorica is the Belgrade representative of the UK-based Quaker Peace and Social Witness (QPSW). Her action research is drawn from her practical field-work in QPSW's Dealing with The Past (DwP) Programme, which seeks to bring together people of different ethnic identities to confront past wrongs and suffering, in order to help them move on to develop new modes of coexistence.

Starting from a feminist perspective on gender, war, and violence more generally, Zorica wanted to explore the role of gender awareness in the process of dealing with the past. Her action research was carried out in her work with mixed groups (male and female, as well as multi-ethnic). Given that a great deal of resistance already needs to be overcome in workshops that address past violence, and that gender is in itself very often an explosive topic, much of her attention was focused on the way in which gender can be introduced, and on related issues of group dynamics and facilitation – specifically her own role as organiser and facilitator. Her research strengthened her conviction that including gender awareness in DwP workshops is both important and possible.

Introduction

I wish I had known more about Action Research at the time I started working on my own research project. Nevertheless, I can describe the process as a very interesting one, which took me from a mass

of accumulated information and ideas in which I was unable to see the wood for the trees, through thick fog, to some clearer light towards the end.

The concept of action research was not clear to me when I began, and that resulted in an overall uncertainty that dragged on through different drafts and required some time to be resolved. At the same time challenges were presented by the diversity of the work I was doing and tasks I was performing within my job. There were numerous questions that I had to try and answer. One thing was certain – I was not in a position to change the shape of my work or my engagement in it, in order to meet the ideal performances for this research; so I tried instead to use the given conditions and available work to pursue my research.

Research location and focus

My action research was conducted in two cycles, through two residential workshop-style seminars on 'Dealing with the Past' (DWP), which took place in 2005 and 2006. In both of these seminars, the participants came from different countries and had different ethnic, national, and/or religious backgrounds.

The focus of my research took some time to define clearly. The topic I eventually set myself reflects my interest in gender issues, exploring their relevance to reconciliation work, through the seminars that were part of a long-term programme on Dealing with the Past in the region of the former Yugoslavia. My research looks closely at the influence, effectiveness and impact of the introduction of gender issues into this work. The title, as well as the research topic, needed some time to define clearly, within the sphere of my work and interest. Key phrases for the research were 'dealing with the past', 'feminism', 'gender awareness', and 'reconciliation'. Much later in the process I realised that group dynamics were also very important, so I added that phrase





to the list. My final title was ‘The role of gender awareness in the process of Dealing with the Past’.

When I began working on my research-in-action in the first of the two seminars, it seemed to me enough just to pay attention to gender insensitive language and gender ‘hate speech’ (so common in the southern Slavic languages and widespread in our societies), and to introduce gender sensitive language into the group’s work. Participants in the first seminar were very responsive to my suggestions and comments on this, but it seemed to me that most of them just stayed within the framework of ‘political correctness’ in their verbal expressions, rather than understanding the deeper levels of gender awareness and sensitivity. Nevertheless, for some of them, especially for several young men, this was a very good start.

At the same time, I realised that I too needed to look at those ‘deeper levels’ of gender awareness and to connect that deeper understanding with an understanding and acceptance of the concepts and terms usually connected with Dealing with the Past, such as ethnicity, nationality, accusation, guilt, responsibility, and many other terms related to war.

Group dynamics as a discipline within social psychology was neither within the original focus of my research nor part of my previous education. However, during the first cycle of my Action Research I noticed changes in the group’s dynamics that were connected with the introduction of gender into our work. This was an important area of observation, and I carried it forward into the next cycle of my research.

After this second cycle I realised that once again the group dynamics had been very interesting, with abrupt changes in mood and interaction. Only then did I decide to look more closely into the significance of this subject for me, reading relevant literature in order to understand it better.

Recording the action and reflection process

How was I to record my action for research purposes? Taking notes proved to be a real labour for me. I

started, during the first session of the first seminar, by somehow managing to take notes on the spot, but that distracted me from active listening. I was taking unnecessary notes, for fear of missing something. In a way I was right – I missed everything, in that I couldn’t follow anything properly! Thus, I gave up taking notes and engaged in listening, which was better for the whole process, and I felt myself to be part of the group.

Having given up on taking notes during sessions, I also had doubts about using a tape recorder. Since I did not have one with me, my views – with all the arguments for and against – remained speculative. I fared no better with note-taking during the second cycle, but my doubts about tape recorders were behind me. I realised I did not need one.

My field journal had a start similar to the note-taking, but with time it grew in substance. Although I was not pleased with its content, there were some important details and observations in it that were helpful to me when I came to writing my research. It contains a lot of critical remarks related not to my research but rather to the whole process of both seminars. But whether in my journal, in reports, or in other papers, most of the most valuable material as data for learning came from notes and narratives written after the action.

Data selection and analysis, and defining and observing my own role

For me, the two most important and challenging aspects of my action research were the process of extracting data that was relevant to it, and defining my own role in the action in question.

Gender relations at both of the seminars were quite complex, simply because the work was done in mixed-gender groups. For that reason much of what was recorded as data contained observations of potential importance in tracking the general gender dynamics in such a group. On the other hand, gender relations on their own, outside of the specific nature and purpose of my work, were not within the scope of my research focus. This meant that data analysis and selection were concurrent processes, going on in parallel and influencing each other. I wanted to





be sure that I chose data relevant for this research. Also, it took me some time to decide not to use any data from my survey-based research, since I realised that those two data sets were very different and incompatible, although they dealt with the same issue of gender awareness and Dealing with the Past. My understanding of my research grew, and themes emerged as I learned to extract the relevant data from the substantial amount of material that I had in front of me. I had accounts of all parts of both seminars, from the preparatory phase to the financial report at the end. I also conducted a small piece of survey-based research, which was related to some other work I was doing. And there were accounts of the planning phases of some interesting activities that were never realised – and even more. For a while I was lost, but then the fog started to clear.

As regards my role as a practitioner, since research-in-action was a new and specific task for me, only detailed analyses of both seminars enabled me to examine this more closely. It was not easy to select the aspects of action relevant for this research from among all the roles I performed during these seminars, which were very intense and required my full and undivided attention. In addition, my overall role was rather complex, and included all the logistical and financial work involved in bringing people from different countries to one venue. Those duties also took up a lot of my energy and attention.

Despite these difficulties, I gradually found my focus; and as I worked on this research and reflected on my actions, I realised that I acted intuitively and with accumulated experience. I did not stick to some learnt model for ways of working in and with a group – I had no such model. It seems to me, from my self-observation, that I know how to listen to participants; but I need some time to digest and verbalise all the impressions and emotions I accumulate during that process. Reflecting on myself after the two research cycles, I was able to recognise that I reacted constructively in situations when conflict appeared in the group. It seems that my listening abilities and my responsibility for the whole process, and for the participants, were decisive in both seminars.

Summary of learning

Searching for and extracting the final data was the most important aspect of my research process, and contributed most to my understanding of Action Research. During both cycles of my research gender issues were introduced into the seminar process, moving from the very general issue of gender sensitive language in the first cycle, to feminism as an alternative to militarism in the second one, so deepening the participants' level of gender awareness. It enabled me to demonstrate how and why raising the awareness of gender in groups of young people of both sexes can influence group dynamics, even to the point of creating conflicts within a group – conflicts that cut across those related to dealing with the past. It was my experience that the resolution of such conflicts built up group cohesiveness at a higher level, which had a direct impact on the further reconciliation work when advantage was taken of this new group cohesiveness. In turn, a deeper understanding of reconciliation was achieved, which further influenced the impact of the seminar and the level of sustainability of this new understanding.

This whole research, from beginning to end, was done under very complex circumstances. Nonetheless, I am proud that I grasped the meaning of Action Research – and I am aware that there is still a lot to be learnt.





Comparing different approaches to youth empowerment in conflict transformation

by **MARIJA RADOVANOVIC**

Marija works in the Belgrade office of Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), in a project on peer education and peer mediation. This project is part of its programme on Conflict Transformation and Youth Empowerment (CTYE). GTZ's vision is to support young people of different ethnic backgrounds in selected regions to participate actively, in schools, youth groups and NGOs, in processes of conflict transformation and democratisation, and to disseminate their learning.

Marija's research purpose was to explore the knowledge and skills that young people gained through the different aspects of the project that she had developed, taking their level of participation as her measure of their empowerment. She traced the progress they made after their training, as peer mediators and in some cases also as peer educators. She focused her learning on three areas: the concept of the project and the nature of its training; the skills developed by the young people, and their application; and the broader empowerment that these produced. She found that peer education was empowering for trainers and trainees, and that the youth centres where this took place gave young people a greater sense of freedom than schools did to apply their skills in helping others to solve conflicts.

The overall goal of my work is to empower groups of young people in the development of their own ideas and initiatives and, in particular, to resolve issues that arise in schools and youth groups through peer mediation. The role of young people in a post-war society is vital. For them to be able to contribute to the full, it is necessary to re-define

methods and roles of work, and to bring about changes in the Serbian educational system. My action research dealt with the concept of youth empowerment, for the transfer of knowledge and skills from peer to peer, in the field of creative conflict transformation. The idea for the research came from the results achieved in my work with adults and young people, in topics such as peer mediation and peer education for mediation, and in programmes to support the school parliament as a body in the school system which provides young people with a space for participation and decision-making on the issues that concern them.

My purpose in this research process was to explore what young people were empowered to do by training, and whether adult or peer training worked better, and why. The theory of social learning provided me with an explanation of the ways in which people learn and why peer education is beneficial. Social learning theory is based largely upon the work of psychologist Albert Bandura⁵. He states that people learn through direct experience and indirectly through observation and by imitating the behaviour of others with whom they identify. Training can enable people to learn in these ways, incorporating participants' own experience and building in them the confidence and ability ('self-efficacy') to carry out particular forms of behaviour. In such training the trainees begin to develop their skills, receiving immediate feedback. They also experience the training exercises and techniques that they will share with those they will train as fellow peer educators.

I conducted my research in three cycles, tracking the activities that took place within the project. I focused on three schools and three youth centres, located in three different regions in Serbia. In all three schools the training was conducted by adults, and in all three youth centres it was conducted by peers. We carried out training in peer mediation, held peer mediation sessions, and supported young people in their own initiatives in the schools and youth centres. I acted as coordinator of these activities and as a consultant on matters related to the implementation of the peer mediation programme.

5. Bandura, A. (1977), Social learning theory, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, USA.





I will focus my attention on three areas: my design of the training programme; the skills gained by the young people and the way they applied them; and the young people's empowerment for participation. In the first two of these the work done in schools and that undertaken in external youth organisations will not be differentiated. Research tools that I used for gathering information were: observation, evaluation, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups.

Design of the training programme

I developed the concept of the whole programme and of the training on the basis of my personal experience as a mediator and mediation trainer, bearing in mind the needs and interests of young people and the opportunities that they have for practising their mediation skills. I collected my data by noting observations and reflections in my research journal during the work with the different groups, and through recording conversations with young people in focus groups and the sifting of written evaluations.

The key components that I identified for inclusion in the training workshops were: ground rules (both for the training and for mediation); understanding how mediation fits into the school's values and ethos; dealing with issues concerning conflicts; mediation principles; the skills and qualities of a mediator; a broad understanding of the mediation process and its practice; negotiation skills; making an action plan to explore how the mediation service will function; cooperation and team work.

The evaluation of the training was positive in most key respects, so that I felt I had, by and large, achieved what I had hoped to. Almost all the participants said that they increased their knowledge and skills as a result of this training, and that what they had learnt was applicable in their daily lives. The strengths they identified in the programme were its structure, logic, and organisation; the skills of the trainers; the practical exercises; and the training materials. Weaknesses they noted were related to time: that it was too limited for the elaboration of the topics – there was too much information for such short workshops – and more

time was needed for practising mediation skills. Throughout the implementation of the programme these factors continued to be identified as weaknesses. They clearly need to be remedied.

Acquisition and application of skills

Both adult and young trainers created a safe environment for the young people to practise these skills, and they left the training strengthened enough to practice skills in everyday life. I collected my data on this through focus group meetings, both with trainees and with their parents and teachers, using questions that I had prepared: first concerning the changes that the young people recognized in themselves – cognitive, social, and emotional; then about their understanding of what they had experienced as mediators; and, in the case of the training conducted by other young people, what they felt had been the advantages and disadvantages of learning from peers.

To summarise what emerged from these processes and questions: the main gains identified by the participants as trainees were in acquiring organisational and communicative skills, learning to respect themselves and others, developing a sense of responsibility and ownership in relation to the programme, and reaching a better understanding of problems. These outcomes applied both to adult and to peer trainers. The main difference came in the level of empowerment achieved by the young people, as outlined below.

Empowerment

Many dynamic processes were set in train by the participants in this project. These constituted my most important data on empowerment.

In the youth centres, young people initiated projects for conflict prevention and management, conducting training with peers and becoming active mediators. They also conducted initial workshops in primary schools in their communities and tried to develop a model for mentoring the younger ones. In Vrbas the young people from the youth centre also participated in the initiation





of local youth policy. Those in Belgrade made an educational DVD on peer mediation and a series of ten twenty-minute TV programmes on peer mediation for national TV. They also worked to promote their programme on radio and TV.

In the schools, the results came in participation in school parliaments: 80% of the peer mediators became members and 60% joined the managing bodies. They initiated joint decisions on school excursions and dress code, and introduced projects for cleaning and painting the school.

But the young people in the schools relied on support from experienced adults as a condition for developing their skills. And they did not understand that mediation could be used outside school hours, for instance during holidays, excursions, and extra-curricular activities. In comparison I found that the young people who had received peer training in youth centres recognized the benefit of peer mediation in a broader way and had far more opportunities to practice their skills.

It seems that information coming from peers is more easily received, and that having freedom and unrestricted opportunity for joint action gives young people the chance to become partners in the process, developing a strong sense of belonging and ownership and the confidence to take responsibility for further developments.

The peer training and mediation programme is new, and I am aware that my focus has been very much on its benefits, perhaps to the exclusion of any disadvantages or weaknesses. I need now to take a more critical look at things that could be improved in the delivery (such as the overloading of content in relation to the length of the training), and at any disadvantages to this approach, or things that limit empowerment, to see how they can be addressed.





Overview of Balkans students and their research

The first student group in ACTS Balkans included four students from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), one from Croatia, one from Montenegro, one from Macedonia, four from Serbia, and one from Kosovo.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)

ELVIR DJULIMAN – The influence of the minority-majority relationship and power balance on dialogue in a divided school.

Elvir Djuliman works with Nansen Dialogue Centre (NDC) Mostar. The long-term goal of NDC Mostar is the building of sustainable inter-ethnic relationships in the post-war segregated town of Stolac in BiH. The specific objective of the work in which Elvir is involved is to contribute to improving inter-ethnic relations in Stolac High School, ‘two-schools-under-one-roof’, where the Croatian and Bosniak schools work in the same building but are administratively divided and have different curricula, separate classrooms, and so on. Ethnic tensions are still high.

In his action research Elvir explored how the power imbalance inherent in the minority-majority relationship between the two ethnic groups affected the dialogue that NDC Mostar facilitates through seminars for Croatian and Bosniak teachers at the high school. In addition, he studied his own behaviour and actions in relation to this work with teachers.

ELVIR PADALOVIC – Return and reconciliation.

Elvir Padalovic works with NDC Banjaluka, to facilitate the dialogue between Serbs and Bosniaks in the municipality of Prijedor, Republika Srpska, BiH.

Elvir’s action research focused on the correlation between the process of return and reconciliation – why it is not working? His research purpose was to question whether – and in what way – having a higher number of returnees contributes to the improvement

of inter-ethnic relations, and to explore the process of reconciliation in general. In addition, being himself a returnee in Prijedor, he examined his own position on this issue: his prejudices, role, and action.

LJULJJETA GORANCI BRKIC – Facilitating return and influencing policy through dialogue.

Ljuljjeta works for NDC Sarajevo, which aims to contribute to the process of return by assisting, through dialogue projects, in the integration of returnees and of internally displaced people (IDPs) from other parts of BiH in the communities of Bratunac and Srebrenica.

Through her action research, Ljuljjeta wanted to explore the role of dialogue between municipal officers and returnees in the process of return. In addition, as someone not belonging to any of the national groups in question, she was looking at her personal reactions to various comments, attitudes and opinions presented during her work. She concluded that there was a need to involve as many people as possible in dialogue activities and to encourage them to find a public voice, since current policy is centrally influenced, and does not serve local needs but increases fear and passivity. She also came to see that, in order to support sustainable outcomes, NDC Sarajevo should assume the role of catalyst, facilitator of inter-ethnic dialogue, which can enable people to act as change agents themselves.

MUSTAFA CERO – The role and impact of ethnic prejudices on the relationship between Bosniak and Serbian young people in the Srebrenica and Bratunac region.

Mustafa, a staff member of NDC Sarajevo, has been working in Eastern Bosnia for several years with a variety of groups: returnees, refugees, teachers, parents, NGO representatives, municipal officials, and youth. In 2006 Mustafa focused his activities on Bosniak and Serbian young people in the Srebrenica and Bratunac regions.

Mustafa’s research goal was to find out what kind of role and impact ethnic prejudices have on relationships between these two groups of young people. In addition, he wanted to observe his own feelings and behaviour during seminars





and interviews, bearing in mind the structure and sensitivity of this group, and the fact that he is also part of the community in which he works, and an ex-soldier. His findings will be used by NDC Sarajevo in planning future activities, and will be made available to other organisations and individuals who are dealing with issues of inter-ethnic relationships.

Croatia

TAMARA MILANOVIC – Does interaction between teachers and parents make teachers more ready to accept suggestions from parents?

Tamara is an undergraduate working to qualify as a teacher of mathematics and computer sciences. She has a strong interest in informal education and workshops, and was invited to work as an assistant on the New School Project for the Nansen Dialogue Centre Osijek. The project aims to help provide conditions for establishing integrated and intercultural schooling in Vukovar, as against the present segregated system.

Through her research, Tamara wanted to learn whether the interaction between teachers and parents in the seminars that she helped to organise and facilitate made teachers more ready to accept suggestions from parents and include them in the design of the curriculum. It emerged in the process that a focus on learning tasks did not result in greater productivity, and that attention to feelings and relationships did assist group cohesion. But she found that the seminars were insufficient to persuade teachers to act on the ideas of parents, rather than simply listening to them.

Montenegro

ZARKO GLUSICA – The learning of participants in the Virtual School (VS) project about different aspects of conflict.

Zarko is engaged with NDC Montenegro in providing peacebuilding education for socially active citizens in the Balkans, through e-learning. His work is focused on enabling ‘virtual students’

to learn about different aspects of conflict, through VS lectures and communication via a web forum, within the ‘Virtual School of Dialogue, Democracy and Peaceful Conflict Resolution’.

In his action research, Zarko explored different issues related to the learning of participants in the VS project within this focus on conflict: what they had learned (and not learned), how much they considered they had learned, and how they were going to apply their learning. He was also looking at the relationship between his own passion for working with new technologies and the ways in which that work is (or is not) effective, exploring how this research changed his thinking about the work he was doing.

Macedonia

ALEKSANDAR PETKOVSKI – The effects of inter-group communication on prejudice reduction among Macedonian and Albanian elementary school students.

As a coordinator of NDC Skopje’s project for inter-ethnic education, Aleksandar was working on a reconciliation project between Macedonians and Albanians from the rural municipality of Jegunovce, whose population was substantially involved in the armed conflict between Macedonia’s government forces and Albanian paramilitary forces. As part of its overall reconciliation efforts in Jegunovce, NDC has started activities related to multi-ethnic education. The organisation of extra-curricular courses was the beginning of NDC’s modest effort to contribute to the search for mechanisms to reverse the predominant social processes of segregation, and to create meaningful frameworks for interaction between Macedonian and Albanian students.

Aleksandar’s action research was focused on the effects of inter-group communication on prejudice reduction among elementary school students. He was testing the assumption that contact between ethnic groups can assist in the reduction of prejudice and hostility, and exploring what enables such contact to have a positive effect and what can hinder that. He was also seeking





to discover the impact of his own experience and identity on his interactions (in his role as organiser) with the people he worked with in the villages.

Serbia

IVANA STOSIC – Possibilities, opportunities and challenges for Roma, on their way from segregation to integration.

In 2003, with Ivana's involvement, NDC in Bujanovac (a town in the south of Serbia) started a project to support the integration of the Roma population into social and political institutions. The aim was to help them rise from 'the bottom of the heap', where they had lived for decades, and to take an active role in the social life of their town and the wider region.

In her research Ivana explored the possibilities, opportunities and challenges for Roma on their way from segregation to integration. She wanted to find out whether and in what ways her leadership helped the Roma community in their process of political integration, and to trace her own journey from the beginning of this work, looking at her prejudices then and the changes that took place in her. In addition, she wanted to find out whether having two elected representatives in local government would make the Roma population more visible in the municipality. A key insight from her research was that the kind of integration that Roma people are looking for is not to be achieved by changing to fit in with the rest of society, but rather by being accepted as they are, with their cultural inheritance, their customs and language, which can enrich the place where they live.

MILOS BOGICEVIC – The introduction of mediation as a sustainable concept of conflict resolution in Vojvodina.

Milos works for the Provincial Ombudsman's Office of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, in Novi Sad. Milos was involved in the 'Ombudsman as Mediator' project, whose goal was to introduce mediation as a sustainable means of conflict resolution in the municipalities of Vojvodina. This goal was pursued through workshops involving the employees of the

complaints committees, high school students, and members of the Living Without Violence Network.

In his research Milos investigated, through his work, what factors seemed to facilitate or impede mediation as a sustainable concept of conflict resolution in Vojvodina; also how his own actions shaped those factors and how he was able to adjust his actions according to what he observed. He wanted to identify the implications of all these factors for the conduct of his trainings in the future. He found that a great deal can be achieved through workshops, especially when a trainer's enthusiasm communicates itself to participants. However, workshops alone are not enough, since obstacles to innovation are often found in the milieu in which people are working, and call for activities to influence attitudes in the wider community.

Kosovo

IVAN RADIC – The design and facilitation of dialogue processes to support the return of displaced people.

Ivan works with Kosovan Nansen Dialogue (KND) in establishing dialogue between returning and receiving communities in the municipality of Kosovo Polje. The last 15 years of segregation, war and tensions have created a huge degree of hatred and mistrust between people in Kosovo, making return very difficult.

Ivan's research goal was to test the assumption that the way in which KND designs and facilitates dialogue processes aids the successful and sustainable return of displaced people, finding the most appropriate way of facilitating such dialogue, and identifying the possible obstacles and risks. He was also seeking to understand the other contextual factors that contribute to or limit the return process. These issues are of key importance for KND and for conflict transformation practitioners in the wider region.







Course information

FOUR

This section has some initial information about the course. If you'd like to know more about studying on the ACTS programme, please visit the ACTS website, or contact one of the regional centres listed inside the front cover.

Course structure

The ACTS course is taken over a two-year period during which time there are six modules. Each module consists of:

Residential seminar (8-10 days)

Guided learning, group work.

Work/home-based study

Reading, action research, personalised study.

Coursework

Assessment tasks vary between centres and can range from essays, presentations, literature reviews, and learning journal reports.

Course learning objectives

Studying on the ACTS course will enable students to be able to:

- Employ conflict-handling skills in all spheres, from interpersonal to public and professional, with increased sensitivity and resourcefulness.
- Share their knowledge and skills appropriately with colleagues and partners.
- Articulate and communicate their work effectively.
- Examine and critique existing knowledge and theory in the field of conflict transformation.
- Analyse and understand complex conflict situations.
- Combine their theoretical understanding and practical experience of a situation to design appropriate interventions and programmes of work
- Assess the impact of interventions and programmes of work.
- Generate and test creative hypotheses and theories for action relating to issues confronting them in their work for peace and justice.
- Write about their research and work in a critical and analytical manner.

Course content

The ACTS course content has been designed to give students a broad understanding of the field of conflict transformation and to look at different phases of conflict in greater detail. Each course will adapt to the needs of the group, drawing upon regionally relevant materials and focusing upon key issues and topics.

Module One | Theories of Conflict

Focusing on articulating and deepening students knowledge about conflict and conflict theories within the global system, this module introduces a number of tools, skills, frameworks and concepts to assist students to develop a common language for working throughout the course.

Module Two | Conflict, Power and Change

This module looks at how conflict can be used as a catalyst for bringing about sustainable peace. Students discover how latent conflicts and issues can be brought to the surface, but in such a way that they do not turn to violence.

Students are asked to think about how they can change themselves, and how individuals and communities can be mobilised to bring about positive change in their societies. Students are encouraged to explore the interconnections between the public, private and institutional spheres.

Module Three | Transforming Violent Conflict

Focusing on how they can work on and transform violent conflict in various situations, students explore and critique a range of different types of interventions and the roles and functions of the different actors. Frameworks for conflict transformation are introduced, applied to local contexts and critiqued.





Module Four | Building Sustainable Peace

Building upon concepts introduced earlier in the course, such as systems change, this module explores how these concepts relate to the later stages of a conflict. It raises questions such as: How do violent conflicts end? How do we build sustainable peace in a post-settlement situation? The transition from violent conflict, to peace settlements and reconstruction of communities and societies forms the basis of module four.

Module Five | Building Theory from Practice

Drawing upon students' Action Research as a prime source of learning, students bring their completed draft projects for presentation and critique during the interactive seminar. In particular, students are challenged to look beyond their practice and their work and to identify the implications of their research for the wider field of conflict transformation. Mechanisms for generating theory through practice-based research are revisited and clarified.

Module Six | Agents of Transformation

This module focuses firstly on students' Action Research and secondly on the evaluation of the course. During the seminar students finalise and present their research at a public event and undergo a formal examination process.



