



Still waiting for peace...

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Almost 70 years after the Second World War, and more than 20 years after the end of the Cold War, peace is still an issue. Ragıp Zık and Cécile Barbeito reflect on how youth work can contribute to peace.



“We want peace”, but what kind of peace?

Cécile Barbeito

Peace means different things for different people: Eastern cultures focus on inner peace, while Western cultures stress social justice more. There are also differences depending on gender: young men are usually more directly affected by wars (they die more) and by military service. Young women suffer from sexual violence and domestic violence (when fathers or partners come back traumatised from war). Youth work for peace can therefore take many different forms.

Ragıp Zık

As Cécile says, when we talk about peace, we should take into account different perceptions from different regions. Conflict as a concept has various meanings depending very much on where people are from. While some young people still breathe the air of armed conflict, some others

picture a conflict as related to discrimination or social and economic rights. Is it possible to address such various conflict perceptions properly? That's a question which remains on the agenda of youth work. Although we can state some principles, one-size-fits-all solutions should not be expected. Youth work for peace is never detached from human rights education. Taking universal human rights principles as a starting point, various strategies and programmes can be developed according to the local or regional reality. In order to talk about peace, firstly, the conflict situation needs to be acknowledged. Youth work can play a significant role for peace only if the conflicting parties are involved in the process. They need to express the singularities of their reasons, feelings and expectations. They should feel that their concerns and needs are well understood. Only then can we develop solutions addressing local realities.



Why is peace still an issue? What are the main threats to peace in Europe today?

Ragıp Zık

Today, apart from the armed conflicts and temporary cease-fire situations in Europe, post-war tensions and the armament industry are serious threats for peace and stability. Even in countries not involved in a war, racist and discriminatory discourse spreads through xenophobia and hate speech, driving societies to intolerance towards ethnic, sexual, linguistic and religious minorities. While the space for freedom of expression is shrinking, cultural assimilation policies against immigrants and historical minorities are still on the peace agenda.

Cécile Barbeito

As Ragıp has just mentioned, military spending and the bad management of conflicts, either within states or outside European borders (attacks on foreign countries through NATO or other military coalitions) threaten peace. Internally, poverty, increasing inequality and discrimination against specific communities are also major threats to peace. Both levels are connected, and are a matter of priorities and political will: inequality exists because many policies prioritise the profit of a privileged minority over collective needs. In parallel, military budgets subtract from funding for social welfare. In 2010, \$236 were spent for military purposes for each person in the world. Whereas more than half of the world lives with less than \$2 a day, such military spending is far from acceptable.¹

Is peace still on the agenda of youth work and training? Is it old fashioned to talk about peace in youth work?

Ragıp Zık

It is easier to talk about peace when war is obviously out there. In the past, we used to define peace as the absence of war, which is actually a situation that still exists in a number of countries in Europe and the world. However, there are also other subtle struggles going on. When there is a subtle conflict, it is more difficult to talk about it. A major part of today's societies fail to recognise the covert threats for peace as they are eclipsed by explicit conflicts and wars. Youth work that aims at youth empowerment and participation can help young people build skills to recognise these threats as well as take action to minimise them.

Cécile Barbeito

In some contexts, peace education is considered naïve or “hippy”. In others, it can be seen as a highly political stand. Generally speaking, in youth groups peace is considered a priority in principle (Girls and Boy Scouts federations, or Service Civil International,² for example, consider peace a priority), though in practice peace activities are often more symbolic (celebrating the day of peace, 21 September) than deeper reflections, training in conflict resolution, etc.

¹ Data from SIPRI yearbook 2010 and World Bank Yearbook 2010.
² www.sciint.org/



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Does youth work have anything to do with peace building, and how? What are the limits?

Cécile Barbeito

Youth work can build peace. But it can also do the contrary (as some fascist youth groups did in Italy and Germany in the 1930s, for example). To contribute to peace, youth groups should adhere to some prerequisites, such as promoting open-mindedness, positive curiosity towards differences, co-operation, empathy, etc.

Ragıp Zık

Young people are the main actors of societal changes. The impact of a group of young people's peace-building activity can be really big. Young people working for peace have done many things in the past. From collective letter writing to street protests, from summer camps to cross-border sports encounters, young people used their creativity throughout history in various conflict zones. What they usually do is a symbolic model

of peaceful coexistence, mutual understanding and reciprocal respect. They show how things can be different at the micro-level and mostly received support from the locals. They challenge the given values and beliefs of the society and question the underlying reasons for the conflict.

Born as a concept and methodology from faith-based movements in the 19th century, youth work was extended to community-based services and student clubs in the early 20th century. The pioneering youth movements and organised youth work for peace emerged after the two World Wars such as Service Civil International and International Voluntary Service. However, it would be too much to expect that youth work can change the conflict situation in one day or make an immediate political impact.



Has youth work ever managed to make a contribution to peace? What are good examples?

Cécile Barbeito

It is difficult to say, as young people have usually been away from the decision-making arena, and are not so visible (there is no youth movement that has received a Nobel Peace Prize, for example, while adult initiatives on youth have, such as Shirin Ebadi's defence of women and children's rights, awarded in 2003). But youth initiatives are usually known for the strength they bring for change (ideas of conciliation demand to overcome the past and look to the future), to train in important values and skills for change (intercultural learning, empowerment, such as Peace Links³ in Sierra Leone empowered youngsters to prevent them from becoming child soldiers) or activism (as the youth movement Otpor!⁴ did in Serbia). Other interesting examples are Vredes Actie⁵ in Belgium, which denounces NATO and corporations that profit from war, or International Peace Brigades,⁶ which succeed in protecting threatened human rights defenders.

Ragıp Zık

This is a hard thing to assess because you cannot achieve short-term results through youth work. It is a rather long process that can only be evaluated through the impact on young people. In a conflict situation it is very possible that the conflicting parties employ a discriminatory discourse, dehumanise the "other" and shut down channels of interaction. Youth work for peace, in most cases, includes encounters of conflicting parties to re-open these channels and create platforms for dialogue. A nice example can be found in Cyprus, located in the UN Buffer Zone in Nicosia, Home for Cooperation⁷ organises several bi-communal programmes and events for young people. Youth work aims to bring positive changes to young people's attitudes and behaviour. In many cases of armed and social conflict, youth work has managed to bring young people from different conflicting parties and helped them develop positive images about each other as well as mutual understanding and tolerance. Youth Initiatives for Change⁸ in Armenia still organises many activities for young people from Armenia, Turkey and Azerbaijan, and involves them in peaceful dialogue.

3 www.peace-links.org
 4 About Otpor! ("Resistance") movement, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otpor!>
 5 www.vredesactie.be
 6 www.peacebrigades.org
 7 www.home4cooperation.info
 8 www.yic.am



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What does youth work need to consider while developing answers for enhancing peace?

Ragıp Zık

While working on the topic of peace it is important to give voice to the ones that do not always represent the mainstream in the conflict such as young women, kids or minority groups. Launched by women from Turkey and Greece in 1998, WINPeace⁹ still works for betterment of relations between Turkey and Greece as well as Cyprus. This movement later gave birth to another initiative called the Turkish Greek Society of Youth that organised several cross-border gatherings and seminars. This type of youth work might have a smaller target group but can build strong networks based on commonalities among the conflicting parties and can easily become a solid example of a step towards peace.

Cécile Barbeito

An important tip is to reach the structural level: in youth work, more than in any other sector, there is a high rotation of volunteers (it is difficult to stay young forever!). This means that youngsters need to make sure their efforts will last even if they are not there, by training others, setting up formal organisations, influencing youth policies, etc. In parallel, organisations should make sure that the means they use are in accordance with peace. This can be done by taking care of all members' opinions, making sure that decisions are taken by consensus, that there is a co-operative distribution of tasks, etc.

Tips to promote the right to conscientious objection:

Send protest letters to authorities that don't respect the right to conscientious objection to military service by subscribing to the War Resister's International Alerts at: www.wri-irg.org/node/2360.

Write letters of support to imprisoned conscientious objectors. Find lists of these people and their addresses at: www.wri-irg.org/node/4718.

What is the situation of conscientious objection and civil service in Europe?

Cécile Barbeito

A peace issue that affects specifically young people is conscription. In most Council of Europe countries, there is a professional army, which means there is no need to do military service. However in 15 member countries, there is still conscription for the military service. Among those, in recent years seven countries have put young people in jail, violating their right to conscientious objection.¹⁰ Claiming the right to refuse to kill and supporting conscientious objectors are some of the tasks that young people can do for peace.

Ragıp Zık

While conscription violates the right to conscientious objection, civil service is often presented as an alternative. Indeed, considering how the military uniform transforms someone from an individual into a soldier, civil service remains a "good" alternative. However, this option is challenged by the rights and duties that stem from the concept of citizenship: fulfilling all political, economic and social duties. Why does one still has to serve the country at a specific position for a specific period of time, as if the rest of those efforts are not counted as service?

Useful links for peace and conflict transformation:

To become familiar with peace-building issues and conflict transformation a good starting point is: www.beyondintractability.org

For networking, finding various resources and being inspired for peace, you can follow: www.internationalpeaceandconflict.org

⁹ www.winpeace.org

¹⁰ Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe (2012). "The right to conscientious objection to military service should be guaranteed in all parts of Europe." Press release - CommDH007(2012).