

IIAS Reports *continued*

Building social cohesion through culture in conflict and post-conflict contexts

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JOURNALISTS, cultural leaders, activists, writers, teachers, social and public cultural workers, academics and film makers, working in the Philippines, Cambodia, Pakistan, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Rwanda, and Macedonia, gathered for a two-day roundtable at the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam on 13 and 14 June. Topic of debate was the role of culture in peace-building in conflict and post-conflict situations. Almost all participants were working in countries with a violent past. Drawing on different contexts, they shared inspiring and exciting experiences, knowledge and understanding, commonalities, differences, best-practices, and experienced boundaries. Recurring interrelated themes were issues of creating spaces for expression, sustainability, resources and funding, cultural policy models, and dissemination of a culture of peace.

From cultural theory to cultural practice

The roundtable kicked off with a theoretical discussion about the definition of culture in specifically conflict and post-conflict situations. Two understandings of culture were explored that exist parallel to each other: an inclusive understanding of culture as a fluid and an open space of sharing, and an exclusive kind of culture, such as politicized discourses of the nation state, out of which supranational organizations like UNESCO grew. Participants saw culture as identity, norms and values, belief systems, ways of life, customs and traditions, as well as cultural expressions of people and communities. The consensus about the concept of 'art' was that it implies a cultural hierarchy, which does not necessarily reflect the complexity of society. Art, as a form of self-expression, was seen as just one form of cultural expression. The fluidity of the discussion was taken as a sign that culture is not static, but flowing and ever-changing.

Analogous to this understanding run politicized discourses of culture that can serve as a catalyst for culture to become a site of conflict and contestation. Political attempts of appropriation of cultural expressions lead to the inclusion and exclusion of communities on a local, national and international level. Such discourse may lead to tensions. Examples are the conflict between Cambodia and Thailand over the Preah Vihear temple, and the fight between Indonesia and Malaysia over the 'ownership' of batik. Culture can also become a victim of conflict, for example when an armed confrontation destroys cultural heritage. When people identify with traditions, their instinct is to protect it. The group at last

came to a consensus in the final session, and agreed to a broad utilitarian approach of culture as cultural expressions. Commonalities in participants' work was a focus on positive elements of culture, and the constructive role it can play in peace-building.

Building a culture of peace

Participants strived to find similarities and commonalities among people, to create cohesion and a culture of peace, inclusion and equality in the communities in which they are working. Culture was seen as a condition for social well-being. Throughout the debates the gap between the theoretical issue of defining culture and participants' cultural activities in local situations quickly became apparent when attention turned to cultural practices of grassroots organizations and individuals in the cultural field. Many of them produce knowledge in different forms, such as archives, testimonies, and other sorts of documentation. Such repositories are often non-existent or destroyed during conflict and post-conflict situations, but they are crucial in the process of creating a critical civil community. For a society to move forward, it is necessary to come to terms with difficult history and (re)write history. Donors, however, are reluctant to fund institutional activities. It was remarked that donors should think about their long-term goals in the country in which they are working.

Education was mentioned as another powerful tool for building a critical society. Creating an active and critical community that is able to engage in public debate, and question what the government is telling its people, is a long-term process. Some participants felt that incorporating culture and peace education into school curricula should not be the sole responsibility of international organizations and NGOs, but rather the responsibility of national governments and local communities. It was acknowledged that foreign support in this respect is important, but never enough to penetrate to the local level. To make the process of peace-building through education more sustainable, the local context should therefore be leading. Governments should collaborate with grassroots organizations and civil society but they should not provide guiding principles, abandon or censor certain cultural expressions. Often, however, the state wants to construct a positive national narrative, which may result in the exclusion of dissonant voices and in turn, self-censorship as well.

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Citizens Archive of Pakistan

Swaleha Alam Shahzada

CAP is a non-profit organization dedicated to cultural and historic preservation, with offices in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad. We seek to educate the community, foster an awareness of our nation's history and instill pride in Pakistani citizens about their heritage. At the Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP), we have tried to collect a version of history that will not only present Pakistan's heritage in a spectacular way but also cannot be distorted. CAP has focused its attention on the tradition of oral storytelling in Pakistan, emphasizing the importance of such narratives in a dialogue on national identity. The Oral History Project, which was launched in 2008 and lies at the heart of CAP, holds interviews with the partition generation and concentrates on people talking about significant events in their lives during the early days of Pakistan.

CAP has now become an extremely valuable resource. We have over 2,400 hours of oral history and more than 45,000 photographs and digitized documents in our archive. Our vision is to develop CAP as the foremost museum and heritage center of Pakistani history, photography, culture, literature and historical documentation demonstrating the strength and spirit of Pakistan from the perspective of a citizen. Determined to take ahead the mission to challenge stereotypes, CAP launched the Exchange for Change (EFC) project in 2010, which aims at improving relationships between school students in different countries. A sustained exchange of letters, postcards, pictures, artwork and videos encourages children to form their own opinions. Currently, EFC is operating in India and the US involving over 3500 school children!

Similarly, in an effort to create lasting peace, build tolerance and change hostile perspectives of the younger generation of Pakistanis, CAP initiated its Outreach Tours programmed in government schools and colleges in Karachi and Lahore. The School Outreach Tours programme strives to inspire over 3,600 children in the most low-income neighborhoods of the two cities. Our lesson plans focus on History, Geography, English Language, and more importantly on character building. With visual rendering as the foremost tool, we have designed various projects to excite the youth. The College Outreach Tours reaches out to over 4,500 first and second year college students. This programme utilizes material from CAP's archive to develop bilingual workshops, based on civic sense, tolerance, democracy and constitutional rights, and invoke critical thinking as well as an understanding of the country's history and heritage.

Swaleha Alam Shahzada participated in the roundtable as Executive Director of the Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP). She has been involved with CAP since 2008, when she launched CAP's flagship programme 'The Oral History Project'. Currently Shahzada holds the position of Executive Director at CAP. Before she realized her calling was in the educational sector she worked as a banker and foreign currency trader. Shahzada worked as the Academic Head at a private school in Karachi before she joined CAP.

Above: Napier Mole Bridge to Keamari [Karachi] 1900.

Institutional realms, such as archives or libraries, should not be the only places for accessing knowledge. Hands-on training proves to be an effective method as well. A successful enterprise was the training of musicians after the regime of the Taliban in Afghanistan to preserve the musical tradition. However, the creation of an audience was another problem. In Cambodia there is still a lot of discussion about places for artists to access knowledge and engage in a dialogue. There are alternative spaces to negotiate the conflict, such as safe community places that are set up as a result of the neglect of the government. Other alternative spaces in Cambodia are the pagoda's. They serve as a safe space for expression and could create sustainability. Such spaces are important to explore when democratic spaces and spaces for freedom are absent.

Cultural events proved to be a good way to disseminate knowledge and create awareness for important topics. 'The Passion show - Sa Panahon ni Erap' was a women's fashion show that took place in 2000 in Manila, the Philippines, to celebrate International Women's Day. It was aimed at the social empowerment of women and invited private fashion designers and artists to design haute couture and to reflect on women's position in society. The format of the fashion show was able to bridge differences and make the topic lighter and therefore easier for people to work together.

Other means of dissemination, but also mobilization, is media. The power of the traditional media of radio and television continues to be very strong because new social media are still a very urban phenomenon. In every situation and context, the form of dissemination should be reconsidered. Television in Cambodia is, for example, completely government controlled, but radio and Facebook are monitored less. In Afghanistan, radio proves to be a platform for exchange in a society where men and women cannot physically meet. Both men and women will phone in for discussions on a variety of topics.

Funding culture

The biggest challenge to the participants is the finance structure of culture, and the need to position themselves within that frame. The penetration of neoliberal thinking in the field of culture results in demands for the quantification of culture. Donors require that cultural activities are formulated in terms of input and output, which can be measured and audited. This brings about various interrelated problems: first, donors and grassroots organizations suffer from misunderstandings. The idea that culture can be quantified and monitored was perceived as problematic. How does one measure the growing of unity, hope or faith? Policy makers without a cultural background have difficulties understanding the non-quantifiable value of culture. Consequently, monitoring indicators do not match cultural practice. It was proposed to change and develop indicators to monitor the effects of culture in cooperation with organizations in the field to create a common language. The importance to talk in terms that can be locally understood was emphasized.

The focus on quantification, auditing and measuring culture leads to a preference to support short-term projects in the field. It was widely felt that institutional support and infrastructural development deserves priority over projects because short-term projects do not necessarily contribute to a long-term process of change and peace-building. It takes a lot of time to get to know the highly specific cultural context of a situation, but the level of acquaintance is a condition for a successful intervention. The question for donor organizations should always be: what are we doing here and for whom?

It appeared that it is a thin line between donor-driven and donor demands. It is a challenge to convince donors of the importance of a project. Part of the art is to master the skills to fit the financial frame, such as applying for grants. International donors can actually help with this kind of capacity building. Organizations such as UNESCO strive to do this, but their (financial) means are very limited. At the same time, participants displayed reluctance because they realized that the consequence of applying for funding means conforming to the financing structure for culture. In practice, participants seek ways to fit the finance frame; for example, turning an artistic project into an educational one, just to get funding. The project might change as a result of this, but not necessarily for the worse. It might gain other, unforeseen, but nevertheless equally important meanings. These issues touch upon the question of foreign influence on the local context. It was acknowledged that outsiders actually have an influence and bring about change, because there is always work that can only be achieved from outside a certain country. There are also instances in which the government recognizes the advantage of bringing in a relative outsider.

Networks for culture

The effectiveness of the financing structures for culture largely depends on the relationship between the donor and grassroots

Himal Southasian

Aunohita Mojumdar

SOUTH ASIA has a very strong and vibrant media culture, led by the Indian media, one of the few that is still a growth industry in an era of rapidly dwindling consumption of traditional media. However, these strengths are applied selectively, and nowhere is the lack of journalistic rigour more apparent than in regional journalism. Many countries in this region have a strong national media, but there is virtually little or no interest in crossing borders except while reporting on cross-border confrontations and conflicts. Mechanical nationalism has become the default position for a very large section of the local media, fostering and encouraging hostilities at its worst and lapsing into lazy ignorance at best.

We share rivers, forests and monsoon patterns and are impacted by deforestation, landslides and flooding, but lack awareness about what exists across the border. We have intricate trade relations that help and curb the transit of goods, but are completely ignorant about the economies of our neighbours. We have massive migration within the region but know little about the peoples of other countries. We have a large portion of our region beset by conflict but little more than a jingoistic appreciation of these. The information and awareness that is needed in the region in order to foster tolerance and build the idea of a cooperative 'southasianness', is missing.

Himal Southasian has sought to fill this gap - not through soap box oratory or rhetorical flourishes, but through hard-headed journalistic rigour. We do not talk about why peace would be nice, we *demonstrate* its criticality. With its long form journalism, rigorous examination of issues, it has illuminated South Asians to each other and South Asia to those beyond its borders. Creating this awareness, we believe, undercuts the knee-jerk hostility that is often the default position in our nations.

As with many good endeavours the magazine faced great challenges to its survival, being forced to shut down in 2012 because of the challenges of distribution and revenue collection in the vast region it covers. To meet this challenge we have now positioned ourselves as a quarterly 'bookazine' and a web magazine launched earlier this year. Our vision is based on idealism but our approach is pragmatic. We hope to cash in on the increasing interest in South Asia. At a time when www is overloaded with information we are positioning ourselves as the go-to place that cuts through the information clutter, providing the tools which prevent readers drowning in the sea of information. It is early days yet, but we are hopeful.

Aunohita Mojumdar is an Indian journalist, who has reported extensively on Indian politics with a special focus on the conflict affected areas of Punjab and Kashmir, as well as on foreign affairs. She lived and worked in Kabul from 2003 to 2011, where she worked as a freelance reporter contributing to Asia Times, Al Jazeera, NRC Handelsblad, the Guardian, Financial Times and other others. Currently, Mojumdar is based in Kathmandu as Associate Editor of Himal Southasian, the only regional magazine in South Asia.

organizations. Local organizations are often ignorant of financing sources. Vice versa, international donors frequently do not know where and how to reach local organizations. When two parties meet, the collaboration can take on different forms. The general view among the participants leaned towards the idea that collaboration between donors and grassroots organizations should be a more equal partnership than they regularly are. The Dutch Prince Claus Fund strives to support partners financially as equals. It is part of a network that connects people around the globe in a horizontal way. To them it is mandatory that support is requested from within a certain society, and based on indigenous knowledge.

Participants perceived such networks as a solution to the sense of loneliness and isolation. Grassroots organizations are sometimes one-man institutions that work towards something that is not supported by mainstream voices or funding channels. Such organizations find themselves isolated and lonely in their contribution to peace-building, which makes it harder to survive. To prevent this from happening, many loners apply self-censorship to fit mainstream discourses. In such instances, networks and collaborations can provide a sense of safety and support. Sometimes security is provided by financial support from international institutions. A network is useful for breaking the isolation, for finding ways to lobby, knowledge production, and the creation of a critical civil society.

Culture and politics

Some issues of culture exceed the local and national level, such as illicit trade of cultural artifacts. Problems like this have to be addressed on an international cultural policy level, at which UNCESO is the main player. UNESCO is able to make a difference in countries in transition by, for example, implementing a programme. This is more difficult in countries that know little freedom, such as Iran. If that is the case, it is uncertain whether the UNESCO office is able to find ways to support, e.g., freedom of expression, and progress is made in small steps. UNESCO wishes to achieve more at a horizontal level and civil movements already make a lot of efforts to work with them. But UNESCO is tied to the structure of the United Nations that works through national governments for the implementation of international conventions.

The question was raised whether participants want to use culture as a tool to help people, or whether the preservation of cultural heritage is a goal in itself. For example, the museum in Kabul is important for the cultural elite. To many people in the countryside, however, the museum is irrelevant because it houses pre-Islam artifacts and does not bring relief to the hardships there. The fight against illicit traffic of cultural objects is a similar issue. On a theoretical and policy level one might argue against this practice, but one could also question who is authorized to tell people not to sell the pots and pans they find on their lands when it helps them to survive. The dilemma here is whether we want to make an actual contribution to people's well-being or whether we are imposing our cultural values on local people. To some, heritage is not something dead that needs to be preserved, but it is very much alive and a living inspiration. In Pakistan, attempts have been made since the 1960s, to erase everything pre-Islamic. In Afghanistan a similar process is taking place, and almost reached completion with the destruction of the Buddha statues of Bamiyan in 2001. In Pakistan, however, UNESCO managed to play a successful role in heritage conservation because many, if not all, remaining pre-Islamic Moghul sites in the country are preserved with help of UNESCO. The preservation of cultural heritage is important to many of the participants, because it is part of the history and identity of people.

Towards the future

A lot more could have been said, but nevertheless a few conclusions can be drawn from the discussions. The financing structure of culture remains a challenge for sustainability. This is the result of the discrepancy between donors' preferences for short-term projects and long-term needs of grassroots organizations in conflict and post-conflict situations. Hopeful is the increasing tendency to incorporate culture in emergency relief programmes on a political level, such as UNESCO's Post-conflict and Disaster Platform. There is a discussion of making culture visible in quantitative statistics of emergency response and taking up culture as a fixed element in educational programmes. The relationship between grassroots and international organizations should be more of a partnership than it is now, because at all times, cultural activities have to be firmly embedded in local societies and contexts. For the future, the challenge remains to make the value of culture more obvious and inescapable.

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