Reconciliation

A working definition

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In January 2003, Democratic Dialogue embarked on a research project entitled *'Community Reconciliation: Realising opportunities, meeting challenges and ensuring new innovation into the future'*. This research was funded by the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation under Measure 2.1 (Reconciliation for Sustainable Peace) administered by the Community Relations Council (CRC). This paper outlines some of the preliminary conceptual issues discussed over the course of the research, particularly the definition of reconciliation and peacebuilding.

The broader research was motivated by an observation that the term 'reconciliation' is not well developed in Northern Ireland and that no agreed definition exists, despite its increasingly common usage in a range of diverse contexts. The purpose of the research was, therefore, three-fold:

- to look at the ways in which reconciliation is *conceptualised* at the political and community level in a number of different areas in Northern Ireland;
- to explore the ways in which reconciliation is *implemented* or realised at the political and community level in a number of different areas in Northern Ireland, and
- to examine the ways in which local government structures have created or constrained opportunities for local reconciliation initiatives to develop.

In order to explore these themes in more detail, interviews were conducted with locally elected representatives, council officials and those working in the community and voluntary sector in three case study areas in Northern Ireland, based on local district council boundaries. As part of the research we decided to present interviewees with a definition of reconciliation applicable to societies in conflict or coming out of conflict. This would be done in order to provide a focus for discussion; to help identify the different and relevant elements of reconciliation; to give respondents an opportunity to debate different views on reconciliation, and to see if it was possible to develop a conceptual approach to reconciliation that was practically applicable to aspects of their work or experience. The findings of the research and how those interviewed viewed reconciliation are currently being written up in the form of a number of reports. This paper begins this process, although it only focuses on how we chose to conceptualise reconciliation.

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In developing our definition we started by identifying what we felt were the main elements of reconciliation according to various texts and fleshed these out. The result is the working definition presented below, which is, by its nature, incomplete. We are comfortable with this imperfection, as we view it as a useful, possibly provocative, tool to stimulate further discussion, rather than a definitive statement which has to be defended. However, before exploring this, it is important to note that in developing the working definition we also had to consider how reconciliation related to peacebuilding as the concepts are often conflated.

Reconciliation and peacebuilding

Peacebuilding as a concept has become increasingly popular over the 1990s. However, there are few common understandings of the term. The term "peacebuilding" became increasingly prevalent since it was used by Boutros Boutros-Ghali—then United Nations Secretary-General—in announcing his *Agenda for Peace* in 1992. Definitions, however, seem to be context bound and vary between voluntary groups, communities at large, policy-makers, politicians and funders. This picture is complicated further when the concept of reconciliation is introduced into the mix. However, we see peacebuilding as a process that is much more expansive than reconciliation. *Peacebuilding* is also different to *peacemaking*.

Ropers (1995) provides a broad definition of these terms when he writes:

> *Peacemaking* is understood to mean the attempt to tackle some concrete problem in a process that generally begins with a difference of interests, proceeds in the form of negotiations, and in the end—if successfully dealt with—leads to an agreement concerning the conduct of both sides. *Peacebuilding*, on the other hand, covers a wider area and, in most cases, a longer time-scale. Its aim is a change in the social structures underlying the conflict, and a change in the attitudes of the parties to the conflict (p.37).

Peacebuilding according to Morris (undated) "involves a full range of approaches, processes, and stages needed for transformation toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships and governance modes and structures. Peacebuilding includes building legal and human rights institutions as well as fair and effective governance and dispute resolution processes and systems. To be effective, peacebuilding activities require careful and participatory planning, co-ordination among various efforts, and sustained commitments by both local and donor partners". The idea of peacebuilding as a long-term process is shared by many international practitioners, with most including reconciliation and the re-establishing or mending of damaged interpersonal and social relations as a vital component thereof.

Thus, we see peacebuilding as a process distinct from peacemaking. We see peacebuilding as a process or series of processes that seek to establish peace and prevent violence from continuing or re-emerging by addressing the root causes and the consequences of conflict. This can involve

a number of processes including, amongst others, building institutions, community development, socio-economic development, social reconstruction, reconciliation, empowerment, mechanisms to address the past, and building effective governance. In doing this one would have to consider different peacebuilding strategies at the individual, community and political levels. We understand reconciliation to be a component of peacebuilding. Our approach to the relationship between peacebuilding and reconciliation is summarised in a diagram at the end of the paper.

That said, we also need to ask whether a degree of reconciliation is necessary in any peacebuilding process, whether a socio-economic development programme through to a process of localised institutional building. To answer this we will need to explore the definition of reconciliation in greater detail and it is to this we now turn.

Defining reconciliation

To develop our working definition of reconciliation we reviewed a range of existing definitions. Whilst all definitions we explored were incredibly useful and informative, many were wordy, complex and often quite inaccessible to the lay person. Motivated by a desire to present a set of simple, yet comprehensive elements that made up reconciliation, we agreed to devise our own working definition of reconciliation applicable to societies in conflict or coming out of conflict.

To this end, we set out to incorporate a composite of fundamentals identified from other available sources and texts. In developing the definition we explored a number of definitions from the existing literature, including dictionaries, handbooks, academic journals and books by practitioners. The sources from which we devised our definition are listed below.

We acknowledge the specific contribution of a number of texts in that regard (see particularly ADM/CPA, 2000; Assefa 2001; Hamber, 2002; Hamber and van der Merwe, 1998; IDEA, 2003; Lederach, 1997; Porter, 2003; Rigby, 2001, and van der Merwe, 1999). Our definition is summarised in the diagrams available at the end of the paper.

In summary we see reconciliation as moving from the premise that relationships require attention to build peace. Reconciliation is the *process* of addressing conflictual and fractured relationships and this includes a range of different activities. We see reconciliation as a voluntary act that cannot be imposed (IDEA, 2003).

A reconciliation process generally involves five interwoven and related strands. These are:

1. *Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society:* The development of a vision of a shared future requiring the involvement of the whole society, at all levels.

Although individuals may have different opinions or political beliefs, the articulation of a common vision of an interdependent, just, equitable, open and diverse society is a critical part of any reconciliation process.

2. *Acknowledging and dealing with the past:* Acknowledging the hurt, losses, truths and suffering of the past. Providing the mechanisms for justice, healing, restitution or reparation, and restoration (including apologies if necessary and steps aimed at redress). To build reconciliation, individuals and institutions need to acknowledge their own role in the conflicts of the past, accepting and learning from it in a constructive way so as to guarantee non-repetition.

3. *Building positive relationships:* Relationship building or renewal following violent conflict addressing issues of trust, prejudice, intolerance in this process, resulting in accepting commonalities and differences, and embracing and engaging with those who are different to us.

4. *Significant cultural and attitudinal change:* Changes in how people relate to, and their attitudes towards, one another. The culture of suspicion, fear, mistrust and violence is broken down and opportunities and space opened up in which people can hear and be heard. A culture of respect for human rights and human difference is developed creating a context where each citizen becomes an active participant in society and feels a sense of belonging.

5. *Substantial social, economic and political change:* The social, economic and political structures which gave rise to the conflict and estrangement are identified, reconstructed or addressed, and transformed.

In addition, although we did not explore this formally in the research, we thought it important to note two additional points in relation to any process of reconciliation.

The first of these is that a reconciliation process always contains paradoxes and even contradictions. It is not a neat or easy process, and can in itself seem incongruous. Lederach (1997) writes most eloquently about this, noting that:

… reconciliation can be seen as dealing with three specific paradoxes. First, in an overall sense, reconciliation promotes an encounter between the open expression of the painful past, on the one hand, and the search for the articulation of a long-term, interdependent future, on the other hand. Second, reconciliation provides a place for truth and mercy to meet, where concerns for exposing what has happened *and* for letting go in favour of renewed relationship are validated and embraced. Third, reconciliation recognises the

need to give time and place to both justice and peace, where redressing the wrong is held together with the envisioning of a common, connected future (p.20).

Thus we can see that reconciliation entails engaging in the process of trying to address these complex paradoxes.

Second, we cannot escape the fact that reconciliation is a morally-loaded concept and different people will bring their own ideological bias to the subject. An individual's definition or understanding of reconciliation is generally informed by their basic beliefs about the world. Different ideologies of reconciliation can be identified (see Hamber and van der Merwe, 1998; van der Merwe, 1999; Hamber, 2002). For example, a religious ideology often emphasises the re-discovering of a new conscience of individuals and society through moral reflection, repentance, confession and rebirth; a human rights approach might see reconciliation as a process only achieved by regulating social interaction through the rule of law and preventing certain forms of violations of rights from happening again; or an intercommunal understanding may see the process of reconciliation as being about bridging the divides between different cultures and identity groups (see Hamber and van der Merwe, 1998; van der Merwe, 1999; Hamber, 2002).

None (and even all) of these approaches might be correct—but we make the point to highlight the fact that our analysis of the subject has revealed time and time again that individuals' underlying assumptions and ideologies fundamentally affect how they see reconciliation. We need to take cognisance of this as the debate on reconciliation unfolds.
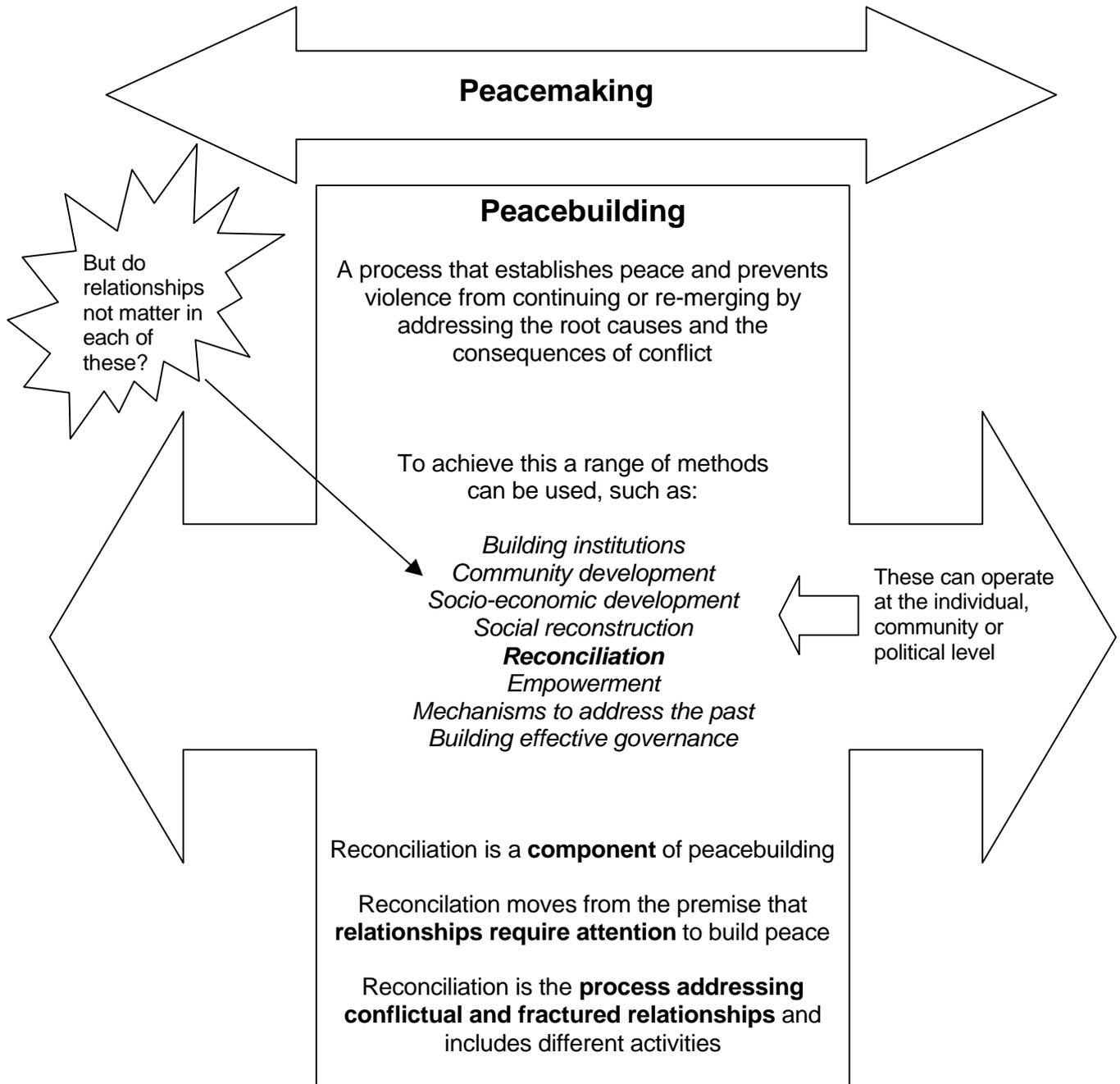

Conclusion

Perhaps in the final instance it is not only the specifics of how we define reconciliation that matter, but how we explain the concept and use it. In this paper, we have tried to outline our working model for thinking about reconciliation in societies in conflict or coming out of conflict. We feel all the strands of reconciliation we identify need to be addressed, but this may take different mechanisms, timeframes and approaches operating in tandem and in a complementary way—there is no quick fix solution to building sustainable reconciliation. In our opinion, reconciliation is after all the *process* of addressing these different strands along with the paradoxes it presents (Lederach, 1997); this is by definition a long-term and complex endeavour. Even if a unified or agreed definition is difficult to achieve in a society in or coming out of conflict there is an onus on all of us to broadly explain what we mean by terms such as reconciliation. It is only through explanation and robust dialogue we can ensure a more reflexive peacebuilding practice. That said, developing a conceptual approach to reconciliation that informs practice, and vice versa, should be a dynamic process. To this end, we hope our

working definition makes some contribution to promoting further ongoing debate and discussion.

Peacebuilding and Reconciliation

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Peacemaking

Peacebuilding

A process that establishes peace and prevents violence from continuing or re-merging by addressing the root causes and the consequences of conflict

But do relationships not matter in each of these?

To achieve this a range of methods can be used, such as:

Building institutions
Community development
Socio-economic development
Social reconstruction
Reconciliation
Empowerment
Mechanisms to address the past
Building effective governance

These can operate at the individual, community or political level

Reconciliation is a **component** of peacebuilding

Reconciliation moves from the premise that **relationships require attention** to build peace

Reconciliation is the **process addressing conflictual and fractured relationships** and includes different activities

Remember: A key process with all this work is not to completely seek a unified definition of terms but explain what you mean by them

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Reconciliation: a working definition

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Our working hypothesis is that reconciliation is a necessary **process** following conflict. However, we believe it is a **voluntary act** and **cannot be imposed** (IDEA, 2003).

It involves five interwoven and related strands:

Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society

Acknowledging and dealing with the past

Building positive relationships

Significant cultural and attitudinal change

Substantial social, economic and political change

It also generally involves the consideration of two concepts:

Paradox

(see Lederach, 1997)

Reconciliation Ideologies

(see Hamber and van der Merwe, 1998; van der Merwe, 1999; and Hamber, 2002).

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Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society

The articulation of a common vision of an interdependent, just, equitable, open and diverse society. The development of a vision of a shared future requiring the involvement of the whole society, at all levels.

Acknowledging and dealing with the past

Acknowledging the hurt, losses, truths and suffering of the past. Providing the mechanisms for justice, healing, restitution or reparation, and restoration (including apologies if necessary and steps aimed at redress). Individuals and institutions acknowledge their own role in the conflicts of the past, accepting and learning from it in a constructive way so as to guarantee non-repetition.

Building positive relationships

Relationship building or renewal following violent conflict addressing issues of trust, prejudice, intolerance in this process resulting in accepting commonalities and differences, and embracing and engaging with those who are different to us.

Significant cultural and attitudinal change

Changes in how people relate to, and their attitudes towards, one another. The culture of suspicion, fear, mistrust and violence is broken down and opportunities and space opened up in which people can hear and be heard. A culture of respect for human rights and human difference is developed creating a context where each citizen becomes an active participant in society and feels a sense of belonging.

Substantial social, economic and political change

The social, economic and political structures which gave rise to the conflict and estrangement are identified, reconstructed or addressed, and transformed.

Two other factors are critically important, namely:

Reconciliation involves a **PARADOX**, e.g. reconciliation promotes an encounter between the open expression of the painful past but at the same time seeks a long-term, interdependent future (see Lederach, 1997). Reconciliation as a concept is always influenced by an individual's underlying assumptions. There are different **IDEOLOGIES** of reconciliation, e.g. a religious ideology often emphasises the re-discovering of a new conscience of individuals and society through moral reflection, repentance, confession and rebirth, but a human rights approach might see it as a process only achieved by regulating social interaction through the rule of law and preventing certain forms of violations of rights from happening again (see Hamber and van der Merwe, 1998; van der Merwe, 1999; Hamber, 2002).

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