Conflict Resolution Through the Simple Art of Conversation

Jennifer Schirmer
U Oslo

At its heart, cultural anthropology is about conversation. Any discerning ethnographer knows that the persons we listen to and converse and associate with shape our worldview and interpretive frameworks. They establish who is within our “discursive horizon” and what we come to know about any given world. Artfully organized conversations that join those who are socially and ideologically dissimilar may serve as a surprisingly simple but not insignificant approach to conflict resolution, particularly if such conversations can create a frank but respectful space for listening to others, maybe even enjoying a beer together.

COMMENTARY

This fundamental notion of conversation among distinctly different and hostile groups has driven a project I have been directing for the last seven years with funding from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, as part of its continuing efforts to nurture peace in war-torn situations. Given the polarized nature of Colombian society, this project, housed at the University of Oslo, has assiduously avoided identifying itself with any institution or sector; indeed its very strength is its neutrality.

Contradictions in Colombia

Colombia is a precarious democracy and faces a myriad of contradictions. It combines a strong and vibrant intra-sectoral debate with intersectoral silence; it couples strong democratic institutions and a working democratic culture with the longest internal armed conflict in the hemisphere that includes assassinations, massacres, forced disappearances and kidnappings. Divisions, after 40 years of war, exist at all levels of the social order: between civil society and the military, between rebels and the government, between left and right and between the rich and poor.

Each sector remains a stranger to the other. It is extremely unlikely for Colombian military and police officers (the total of the security sector in this state) to have social ties with civilians other than those with conservative and right-wing views. Officers are part of a public force (Fuerza Pública) yet they are citizens of the public sphere of democracy in only a rhetorical sense. They view the public sphere as a threatening and conflictive sociopolitical arena rather than as a forum ripe with opportunities for deliberating informed political choices or amicable negotiations.

Similarly, many progressive intellectuals and academics in Colombia have their own form of social isolation, keeping to their social world with little access to the armed forces partly out of lack of interest and partly out of disdain. Many admit to not having the proper “forum” to generate political debate with officers.

Armed Actors and Peace

With lessons learned from peace processes throughout the world that have failed to include armed actors early on, I asked, why not bring armed actors of the state and ex-combatants together with civil society in “conversations” in the midst of the conflict in preparation for peace. I called these deliberations “peace skilling.” Peace skilling is based on gradual, constructive engagement to privilege politics over violence by facilitating respectful dialogue. It is a constructivist, interactive process, growing out of many preparatory discussions and dialogues with officers and civilians. It is also a learning process for all, including for me, as all share with others their ignorance and concerns about the other.

On the basis of initial conversations, it became clear to me that the Colombian officers were open to new ways of interacting, although nervous about meeting the “more progressive” sectors face to face. With this in mind, I worked with the Colombian team (a human rights lawyer and an ex-guerrilla-journalist) to establish informal, neutral, but frank and unscripted, off-the-record dialogues entitled “Conversations” (Conversatorios).

Conversatorios

Conversation, as we know, requires listening as well as talking. One of the first rules of the conversatorio is that each participant listens to and respects the experiences and opinions of others. Listening, participants are assured, does not imply agreement or adopting a different viewpoint. Rather, conversatorio helps people avoid polemics and build a more continual stream of conversation that allows the participants to see that a different analysis of the conflict and its resolution may be formulated if each person is willing to view the conflict through different experiences and from different perspectives.

Conversation, as we know, requires listening as well as talking.

Over the last five years, 15 conversatorios involving more than 175 officers have provided an arena for debate, analysis and reflection about a number of themes: humanitarian accord with the guerrillas, paramilitarism, land reform, the economic costs of war, trade unionism, rehabilitation and work programs of ex-paramilitary youths and lessons from other peace processes.

Taking these themes out of the polemical world and placing them within a world of open discussion of ideas in a neutral space results in interesting concurrences of thinking and transformation of attitudes. For instance, ex-guerrillas speak about their view of class exclusion and social justice whereas officers speak about their resentment of the ruling elite. From this dialogue, at times, they have come to realize that they may have similar ideas about social justice but the vocabularies emanate from different histories and narratives.

Over time, one can begin to see a slow disintegration of officers’ resistance to perceptions and predispositions of those they originally believed to be intrinsically antagonistic to their institutions and their own interests. Attitudes and social behavior change: “alumni” of past conversatorios are relaxed and fluent in conversing with civilians and ex-guerrilleros whenever they are invited to another conversatorio and readily serve as “mediators” between new officers and their civilian counterparts, who are often stiff and defensive during the first evening.

On the other side, many an ex-guerrilla, leftist politician, human rights lawyer or international organization representative who has participated in these dialogues, have admitted prejudgments of the military as being erroneous. These dialogues serve then as a kind of ethnographic education for all parties, encouraging the overwhelming of initial predispositions and prejudices to see the other as a legitimate and ultimately helpful participant in dialogue about the future of peace.

Building Trust

The most delicate part of the skilling has been to gain the confidence of the officers in listening to ex-guerrilleros’ conflict experiences. To be able to meet one’s “enemy” face to face, to learn that they have views with which some of the officers can agree and others cannot and to learn that the ex-guerrilleros can disagree among themselves, is a critical transformation in attitude change. They allow officers to familiarize themselves with the history of peace negotiations in Colombia through the optic of an ex-combatant, and help them visualize what their constructive role as an armed actor of the state could be in future demobilization and ceasefire settlements.

What the project has set out to accomplish has been building understanding among previously segregated social groups and in so doing, to build the basis for a more effective and pluralist discourse. More critically, it has centered its efforts on the security forces and non-state-armed actors—social groups that are conventionally ignored in efforts to build peace.

See Art of Conversation on page 10
Art of Conversation
Continued from page 9

Without the active and engaged participation of these groups in dialogue with civil society, sustaining peace and creating a democratic culture is problematic at best. Not surprisingly, in attempting to build such a dialogue, I found resistance among both the officers and members of civil society. Building trust and the basis for mutual dialogue has revolved around not so much abstract issues of human rights, peacebuilding and democracy but around the building of a process that has fostered dialogical debate and deliberations about substantive issues that have significant consequences for all the various groups in Colombian society.

The goal has never been to develop a singular viewpoint about the challenges Colombia faces. Rather, through the very process of interaction, I have attempted to bring together groups previously set apart, to create the basis for informal dialogue and deliberation and, in so doing, provide a model for democratic interaction and conversation as part of a peaceful resolution of conflict. Hence, it has been not so much about what is said in the conversation as it is about building on the foundation of an anthropological sensibility and creating a social basis for deliberation that will allow participants to overcome political and economic exclusion and help to resolve Colombia’s internal conflict.


Paradoxical Implications of the Aid Business in Liberia and Elsewhere

Veronika Fuest
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany

S
cholars in the emergent field of conflict research in anthropology have variously studied how both individual and collective identities are figured according to new social, economic and political roles acquired by force or by choice during conflicts. Within this field some scholars have focused on how extended conflict may provide novel scopes of action to the less powerful or marginalized, weaken traditional institutions and deconstruct ideologies serving dominant groups to legitimate their traditional claims to leadership and control over resources.

Implications of Aid
What is often overlooked, however, is the substantial influence of the international peacebuilding and development business on the directions that these conflicts take, on the choices that local actors make and on changes in opportunity structures. Against the backdrop of the neoliberal program and with a view to transforming society with ameliorative measures, the aid business interferes in these dynamic contexts in manifold ways.

In particular, the aid business may reinforce or build civil and representative institutions that include social subgroups perceived to be previously suppressed or excluded from politics, for example women and youths. A crucial concomitant is the flow of material and symbolic resources into local economies in the context of reconciliation, gender mainstreaming and leadership workshops conducted by proliferating NGOs.

The Workshop Culture
My research in Liberia shows that categories used to construct identities and differences between genders as well as elders and youth appear to draw on international discourses to an increasing degree. Analysis of the implications of participatory, inclusive methods and international discourses so characteristic of the “workshop culture” in peacebuilding and of the local appropriation of resources adds another dimension to the debate on the “Tyranny of Participation.” Workshops furnish a variety of resources to those invited or selected to participate. They facilitate access to food, money (“subsistence fees”), entertainment (modern media), intellectual stimulation, new ways of communication and prestige. They offer opportunities of building and expanding relations within a patron-client system that extends its branches into urban and modern networks. A standard stratification of workshop participants aiming at the inclusion of representatives from social subgroups contextually considered as relevant—local authorities, traditional leaders, women and youths—is employed throughout.

Other criteria of stratification important in this region, such as lineage and “first comer”–“stranger” status, are ignored. Whereas agencies with a narrow functionalist perception of the virtues of traditional rulers may unwittingly support the reconstitution of an oppressive system and become party in ethnic, religious, gender and intergenerational conflicts.

Developmental Paradoxes
Some development agents, often informed by the concepts of traditional or restorative justice, indiscriminately champion local institutions, “traditional authorities,” which are perceived as “social capital” in reconciliation. They are assumed to have retained regulatory powers and conflict resolution competence that the “failed” state has lost in the course of the war. In many cases these authorities, usually members of local elites in various senses, harbor ambitions to maintain or to revive hierarchial systems of dominance that may include human rights viola-