
An Evaluation of 'Process as Product' in OTI Sri Lanka: A Typology of Community-level Peacebuilding Activities and Programming Recommendations

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Abstract

This paper presents a set of best practices and lessons learned from a set of 93 impact evaluations conducted on community-level, small grants activities implemented between March 2003 and September 2007 by the Sri Lanka country programme of the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It analyses the change theories that guided programme development and common trends in impact which emerged, and discusses ways in which programme staff can improve project impact. It provides a working definition of 'process', a key element of OTI's approach and a key concept used by facilitators to understand the work they do with groups and communities. It also delineates a general typology of peacebuilding projects likely to emerge in the community setting. Finally, it formulates a postulate for predicting and observing generic programme impact based upon the relative richness of process, which is considered useful for informing further research design.

Introduction

In February 2002, a ceasefire agreement was signed between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the government of Sri Lanka. In an attempt to strengthen this initiative – and, according to some observers, the government reforms that accompanied it – many

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donors and international organisations provided large amounts of foreign assistance and development funding to Sri Lanka (Bastian 2005:11-27). In March 2003, OTI opened a country programme with a clearly articulated mandate to support 'a negotiated settlement to the long-standing civil conflict in Sri Lanka'.¹ All OTI projects in Sri Lanka

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In April 2004, OTI launched a monitoring and evaluation initiative intended to provide feedback on project successes and failures which could be used to inform ongoing programme development activities. The evaluation was not designed or intended to produce a 'report card': OTI wanted lessons learned and best practices that would improve the effectiveness of programme activities. A useful framework for placing this evaluation within a broader theory

of evaluation related to peacebuilding and within a broader theoretical discourse is provided in the recently published *Aid for Peace* by Thania Paffenholz and Luc Reyhler. The authors delineate seven categories of criteria for evaluating peacebuilding interventions (Paffenholz & Reyhler 2007:46-57).² With reference to this framework, the intended focus of evaluation for OTI activities was 'peacebuilding relevance' (47-49) and 'peacebuilding effectiveness' (49-51) of OTI projects (at the community level), and to a lesser extent, 'impact on macro peacebuilding.' (51-52). The evaluation activities conducted by OTI implicitly focused on these levels, although they were never explicitly stated as such at any time. The design and methods adopted could have been used to provide evaluative feedback on other categories outlined by Paffenholz and Reyhler, but this was not done.

This article highlights issues and lessons learned, seeking to:

- Identify and discuss a generic pattern of impacts from a diverse sample of OTI project activities based on the findings of 93 small grant impact evaluations, and identify and describe the operant programme mechanism responsible for generating evidence of positive impact;
- Contribute to discussions about programming and impact assumptions made by both OTI and by local implementing partners – assumptions common to many agencies seeking to implement community-level peacebuilding in Sri Lanka and elsewhere – and critique these assumptions from an impact perspective;
- Delineate a generic typology of projects likely to be devised as grassroots, community-level peacebuilding interventions, and provide specific recommendations for best practices of how programme staff can increase the positive impacts from activities that fall within this typology.

Evaluation methods

All units inside USAID are required to develop a results framework known as a 'performance management plan' (PMP) – a hierarchical framework drafted to reflect the theory of change which drives programme design and implementation, and evaluation of success. It contains a strategic objective which is the macro-level programme result, one or more 'intermediate results' which logically support the strategic objective, and specific indicators – usually designated project outputs – by which progress is measured against intermediate results. The strategic objective is the OTI country mandate mentioned above: 'To promote support for a negotiated settlement to the long-standing civil conflict in Sri Lanka.' Three identified sub-objectives under which various grants were developed were:

- To demonstrate tangible benefits of peace;
- To increase the exchange of accurate, balanced information on peace-related issues in society;
- To promote community-level conflict management and peaceful coexistence.

Each of these sub-objectives has identified output indicators by which performance is gauged. Additional indicators that focused specifically on impacts were devised which are not reflected in the PMP. It is these impact indicators which form the data set informing the discussion in this article. Grants were selected for impact evaluation randomly, with grants from each sub-objective and in each region where OTI operates.

To conduct impact assessments, qualitative methods with an intensive case study format were devised, using semi-structured group and key informant interviews to collect data,



relying on triangulation as a mechanism for confirming indicators of change. Projects were evaluated based upon a target of one out of every seven projects implemented. At the completion of the pilot phase in September 2004, there were 26 individual projects evaluated, selected from every region inside Sri Lanka where OTI was operating. Another 67 projects were evaluated after the pilot phase was completed.

An attempt was made with each grant to conduct several separate impact assessment activities, with various persons identified as interviewees. Among interview participants were project participants/beneficiaries, outside key informants from within the community, and staff of implementing partners. Interview participants varied from grant to grant, and thus it is a fair critique of these results to say they suffer from a lack of uniformity in approach. However, for reasons reflecting the reality of conducting evaluation within a complex, frequently challenging social environment, and due to the emphasis on generating evaluative data rather than social scientific research data, this variability was viewed to be acceptable. Paffenholz and Reychler (2007:39-44) identify this perhaps lackadaisical approach to 'research-oriented' evaluation as a problem requiring more attention, but they also acknowledge that the requirements of evaluation are different from those of pure research. This is especially true given resource and other organisational constraints which impact the conduct of evaluation, when evaluation is viewed solely as a tool for providing useable information within an organisational context.

The following list of impact indicators was devised. With each of these indicators, the evaluator sought evidence that these changes were attributed directly to outcomes from OTI project activities.

- Reported change in attitudes/perceptions towards other groups, especially improved trust and decreased fear and stereotyping.
- Individual positive assessments of process quality, willingness to participate again in similar activities, or suggestions that the project be replicated or expanded.
- Reported change in perceptions about local ability to collaborate between groups and/or improved security conditions.
- Reported change in perceived knowledge or attitudes about key transition issues, which were fairly broadly defined by the programme, but which included, for example, issues related to devolution of power and federalism as a model for political organisation; the issue of Tamil and other minority rights claims; the feasibility or desirability of a negotiated solution to the conflict etc.
- Anecdotal reports and storytelling, confirmed through triangulation among multiple interviewees, about changes in interaction between groups or specific instances of successful conflict resolution at the community level.

A graded scale was devised to assess overall impact of individual projects. Although the scale shown below is somewhat subjective – based as it is upon non-quantifiable observations made by the evaluator during qualitative interviews – it is nonetheless systematic:

5 – High positive impact: All or most indicators clearly present and enthusiastically confirmed by all or most interview subjects; positive anecdotes abundant among most or all interviewees.

4 – Positive impact: Multiple indicators clearly present, moderately enthusiastically confirmed by majority of interview subjects; no credible contradictory reports exist; positive anecdotes related by many interviewees.

3 – Neutral impact: Positive indicators mostly absent or credible contradictory reports of indicators exist, thus cancelling each other out, with notable lack of enthusiasm for project impact among interviewees; no reports of clear negative impacts emerge; no positive anecdotes discussed.

2 – Negative impact: No positive indicators present, with clear presence of at least one negative indicator. Reports of increased tension between groups or frustration with project occur among a few or several interviewees; some negative anecdotes reported in terms of heightened tension, perceptions of unfair resource distribution, and negative attitudes towards process or outputs.

1 – High negative impact: Multiple negative indicators present with multiple interviewees confirming these, and multiple negative anecdotes discussed; particular note paid to reports of increased conflict tension resulting in overt conflict behaviour, retreating into factions or camps, acts of violence, etc.

As impact evaluation was undertaken, detailed reports were generated, with patterns of successful impact and lessons learned identified and with future programming recommendations made.

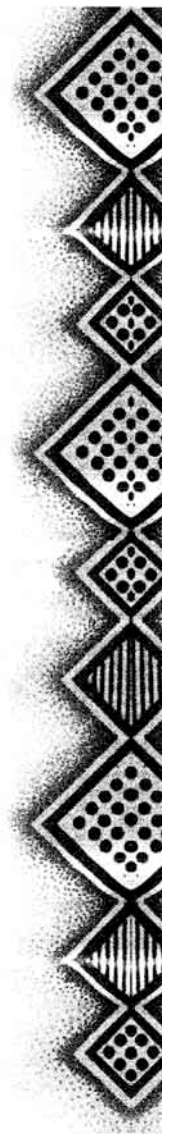
'Transitional Programming' versus 'Development'

In order to orient the reader, before moving on to discuss change theories which underpin OTI programme development in Sri Lanka and patterns of impacts that emerged from evaluation, it is necessary to discuss the assumptions, methods and mechanism which characterise the OTI approach and its theories of change.

The OTI approach

OTI performs a unique function within USAID: its mandate is to fill the gap between immediate relief activities, which target humanitarian needs in complex emergencies, and longer-term development activities – the so-called 'transitional period'. OTI was created with recognition that frequently, in the short but highly unstable interim period that exists between the end of a political crisis or a protracted war and the time when new, more stable structures have had time to develop, there is a critical window of opportunity when time is ripe to provide support. Such was the situation at the time of the ceasefire between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. Furthermore, if this window is not exploited, it is often the case that in the chaos of transition, there is a tendency that the situation will revert to crisis or war. If international agencies do not move quickly to facilitate peace and stability, and support the momentum towards a new, more stable situation, there is a likelihood that nascent peace processes may dissolve, tenuous negotiations may break down, and the situation may revert to war.

OTI focuses programming activities on small, low-cost, short-term grants primarily designed and implemented at the community level. Unlike many other humanitarian actors, OTI does not have any particular sectoral focus. In Sri Lanka, OTI has provided resources for activities as diverse as health clinics, language training, student exchange programmes, agricultural infrastructure, micro-enterprise development, community dialogues, and media campaigns, among many others. OTI seeks to develop projects that bring people together across community divides and facilitate the creation of a social space where peaceful attitudes and perceptions can take root. OTI refuses to characterise the work it does as 'development'; as



stated in a programme description report from OTI, 'Unlike traditional aid programmes that aim at economic and social development, OTI's focus is overtly political.' Its basic assumption is that progress on health, education, and economic growth will be difficult in transitional and post-conflict environments and in the absence of stable and accountable governance. By helping local partners to change attitudes and behavior patterns – particularly those that affect political participation – OTI encourages the development of an institutional framework within which long-term development can succeed.²

Another paper could be written on this topic alone, and many critics of OTI believe the distinction is somewhat artificial; when examining the diversity of OTI projects and many of the specific outputs these projects produce, it is hard to see a clear distinction between OTI community-level projects and similar projects designed and implemented to produce development results. However, embedded in all of these diverse OTI programmes, which

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may superficially resemble development projects in structure or operation, there is a highly significant unifying purpose that constitutes the unique OTI approach. OTI elicits locally emergent development priorities, which are then developed and implemented with an emphasis on creating a dynamic fusion between 'process and product' as the mechanism for generating transformational,

'transitional' outcomes. Some OTI insiders even say, 'Process is the product.' In this discourse, 'product' is the concrete output of project activities: for example, the construction of an agro-well, or the provision of sports equipment and uniforms. 'Process' can be defined as any structured, collective activity designed to create an outcome that brings together a diverse group of people to achieve a common purpose and that results in a significant degree of interaction and/or communication. While the specific project outputs may vary widely, this intended focus on generating rich process is consistent in every project OTI develops and implements.

Theories of change

In order to understand how OTI sought to 'promote support for a negotiated settlement', it is necessary to discuss in some detail the theoretical assumptions which underlie the various 'intermediate results' laid out in the PMP. Each of these sub-objectives creates a rationale that justifies providing resources to certain projects in certain areas; the results which were identified through evaluation activities provide a critique and/or a validation of their effectiveness as stimulators for the change OTI sought.

To demonstrate tangible benefits of peace

It is generally recognised that areas in the north and east of Sri Lanka suffer from a lack of basic social services, absence of a productive economy and economic opportunities, a lack of infrastructural development, shortages of consumer goods, damaged or destroyed property etc. The conflict compounded these deficiencies. The Tamil-majority north and east cover not only those areas that are the most heavily war-damaged, but they also suffer from a Colombo-centric, pro-Sinhalese rural and social development approach that has systematically discriminated against the region in terms of resource allocation and government priorities. While the war has wrought little destruction in the Sinhalese majority areas in the deep south of Sri Lanka, it has siphoned away resources that might have been used for more productive activities. The mostly poor and politically disempowered rural

south suffers Colombo's neglect and is consistently under-resourced in terms of essential government services. There is a common perception, especially in the Sinhalese-nationalist

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strongholds in the south, that resources are allocated disproportionately in the north and east – a perception encouraged and perpetuated by nationalistic political actors who find their constituent base among the southern rural population.

There are several assumptions which drive the rationale for developing projects focused on delivering 'tangible benefits of peace', which I will discuss briefly. To begin, the war has exacerbated regional inequalities and resource scarcity all across the island. Now that open warfare has halted, a window of opportunity has opened to engage in development activities to improve the quality of life. Underlying this observation is a set of assumptions that describes how the delivery of 'tangible benefits of peace' serves to accomplish the OTI strategic objective. Development did not or could not occur during the war, and civilians thus suffered not only from the fear and trauma of war-related violence, but also from lack of resources and the absence of development. Now, however, development can happen, and in its various forms will contribute to a necessary and valued improvement in the lives of rural people. The beneficiaries will support peace to secure development, and one way to do this is to mobilise for a negotiated settlement. In key areas of the south, where the dominant discourse is one of resource scarcity due to exclusion and reverse discrimination, where it is erroneously believed that resources are allocated disproportionately to the north and east, delivery of tangible benefits makes good theoretical sense; doubly so, because in these areas the discourse is nationalistic and generally pro-war, and the national-level Sinhalese political pressures for war mostly emerge from the south.³ This rationale makes abstract strategic sense, but there is little evidence gathered during evaluation activities to support it in terms of actual impact results.

This assumption of an upwelling of political pressure in support of peace is culturally grounded in Western assumptions about the structure of society and the nature of political systems. It rests on a model of social participation in political decision making, a model where political decisions are heavily influenced – and often primarily determined – by political pressure generated at the grassroots (Bastian 2003:132-151).

Sri Lanka has little tradition of social movements, or even of publicly driven political accountability; protests and strikes, many of which are politically orchestrated, are common in response to issues which directly affect specific constituencies, such as private bus owners, university graduates and tea estate workers. It is consistently observable when engaging in evaluation activities that rural and village people see no meaningful link between their activities and their ability to influence political decisions. Furthermore, most people believe that the populace is subject to the whims and caprices of the political class and has no real political influence. (Orjuela 2004:111, 155-157). Especially in the rural areas, but generally throughout Sri Lankan society, there is a deeply entrenched tradition of status-based social organisation and elite privilege, which further contributes to a political culture of minimal participation.

Nor do most people perceive the link between development activities and the absence of war. The universal response during evaluation interviews is that development is a result of poverty-based need and is intended to reduce poverty. Consistently in all 'benefits of peace' projects, in all geographic areas where evaluation activities occurred, there has been an absence of the indicators sought under this sub-objective. Supporting this finding, nationally only 18% of survey respondents report that a likely benefit of peace will be



development. Among Tamil respondents, the number rises to 34.5%, while among Sinhalese the number is 15.3% – which challenges the assumption of ‘benefits of peace’ as a mechanism for producing support for peace, especially among the Sinhalese in the south (CPA 2005).

This consistently observed lack of indicators of impact around the ‘benefits of peace’ sub-objective led to its abandonment in September-October 2004 and a revision of the PMP.

To increase the exchange of accurate, balanced information on peace-related issues in society

This sub-objective assumes that much conflict-related political discourse in Sri Lanka is founded upon inaccurate information or on disinformation designed to manipulate public perceptions. Both information trends are readily apparent in local media reports and

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have powerful impacts on attitudes among a public which has little critical media literacy. Media organisations in Sri Lanka frequently distort information, or make it up, to pursue nationalistic agendas. Reports of military engagements consistently list implausibly

high body counts for enemy combatants, for instance, and reports in 2005 attributing chemical and biological weapons capabilities to the LTTE caused widespread distress among residents of Colombo.

In contrast to such misleading information, taken at face value, projects designed to offer balanced information should ideally influence public opinion in a positive way, and the media culture should uphold journalistic ethics. In an initiative to transform Sri Lankan media, OTI has funded several projects to educate journalists and community-level social and political leaders on conflict-related issues. One such project was evaluated in Galle, and the participating journalists and community leaders interviewed all commented favourably: the project had substantially informed and altered their opinions about key topics; they described specific, nuanced understandings of the issues related to minority rights and devolution as potential tools for resolving conflict; their negative perceptions and stereotypes of other groups had been challenged; and all felt that negotiated settlement was not only possible, but desirable.⁴

Sri Lankan politicians are generally elected on the basis of their traditional affiliations with certain regions or the voters’ assumptions of patronage and delivery of benefits, rather than for their support of the peace process. Nonetheless, it can be assumed that raising peace awareness and challenging stereotyped attitudes among grassroots voters may alter voting patterns, bring about peaceful change, and lay the ground for harmonious coexistence between ethnic groups. To target a wide cross-section of Sri Lanka’s 18 million inhabitants for awareness-raising workshops would be unworkable; rather the focus of such projects should be influential actors such as journalists, politicians, community leaders and other prominent citizens.⁵

To promote community-level conflict management and peaceful coexistence

Ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka vary widely across regions and from village to village within regions, and much of this has to do with local experience during the war and in local memory. Some areas have a history of inter-ethnic violence between villages; others continue to enjoy positive community relations and inter-ethnic harmony. A consistent trend is that at local, regional and national levels, negative peace perceptions are closely linked to micro-

level events. It is difficult to counter this perceptual effect when violence occurs, but various programme options exist to reduce or prevent local-level conflict, and thus prevent events that generate negative public perceptions.

A variety of OTI projects demonstrated powerful impacts at the local level in mitigating or preventing conflict, and among these impacts were: enhancing trust and positive interaction between groups; improving safety and the local security environment; and establishing local structures and mechanisms to trigger early warning or intervention measures.

'Contact' and Peacebuilding Interventions

The previous discussion focused on the change theories OTI used in Sri Lanka to categorise programme objectives. In the OTI model of programme implementation, local implementing partners are intimately involved. The success or failure of an OTI activity typically rests on the skills and implementation methods of local partners rather than on the pillars of OTI theories of change. Three repeated challenges crop up when local partners or peacebuilding practitioners lack expertise, to the detriment of programme impact: limitations of 'contact' to produce impact; difficulties of expanding impact beyond the project participants; and the problems participants face when returning to daily lives entrenched within a social system. Each of these problems can and should be reasonably anticipated in the programme development stage, and remedies to prevent them should be included in programme design.

Most peacebuilding projects – in Sri Lanka and elsewhere – are funded or implemented by agencies that traditionally engage in development or humanitarian assistance. The 'development paradigm' that informs their peacebuilding activities obliges them to conceive problems in terms of availability of and access to scarce resources. These actors often extend this assumption to cover the causes and conditions of conflict. While it is certainly the case that the conflict discourse in Sri Lanka contains references to resources, the perception is that scarcity is a *result* of ethnic identity – the politics of preference and ethnically motivated injustice. Few people in Sri Lanka believe that the root of the ethnic problem is that there are not enough resources to go around. It is frequently the case that scarcity triggers competition in local communities and people become polarised in ethnic camps, but this is a result of the identity assumptions of the people in conflict, not a cause of them.

In general, people rightly believe at their local level that ethnically related perceptions of certain events trigger violence – for instance, perceived injustices or rumours of provocation, or violent incidents. There is a distinction between violence and conflict, but they are intertwined. In the interviews, there was only one person who clearly linked

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development with a state of 'no war' – it was conspicuous for its lucidity and uniqueness. No single interviewee linked the conflict in Sri Lanka to resource scarcity: respondents observed that discrimination created scarcity in Tamil areas with Sinhalese monopolies of access, for instance, but not the other way around. It is clear that when scarcity occurs in certain regions, people divide into 'ethnic

groups' to fight for access, but no respondents said this was the cause of the conflict. Among the Sinhalese, there is broad recognition that root causes of the conflict revolve around lack of minority rights and systematic discrimination, although other factors are attributed (CPA 2004:39-40).



The 'Contact Hypothesis' (Allport 1956; Sherif *et al* 1961) assumes that conflict is caused by fear; that fear is caused by ignorance; that ignorance is caused by the fact that people have little opportunity to get to know each other; and that stereotyping and mistrust will fall away as people come to understand their common humanity. Yet in Sri Lanka, many of the areas most severely affected by conflict also have the highest levels of intermingling between ethnic groups; there has never been a time in Sri Lanka when there was no contact between ethnic groups.

Peacebuilding activities based on contact theory are often overly simplistic, revolving around delivering concrete development outputs that distribute equal benefits to beneficiaries across groups as a stimulus to positive interaction. Or development inputs are secured across ethnic lines, insisting, for instance, on inter-ethnic common labour for construction, or insisting that procurement occurs through vendors and suppliers identified from among the 'other' group.

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Superficial multi-ethnic contact of itself will not succeed in eroding fear and mistrust, negative stereotypes, or accumulated psycho-trauma that characterise inter-ethnic relations in violent conflict environments. Most peacebuilding initiatives which fail to have a positive impact or which produce clearly observable negative impact are project variations designed according

to the contact hypothesis. This is not to say that contact is unnecessary to conduct effective peacebuilding programmes – it is simply not sufficient. Contact produces positive impact only if it is a vehicle for process. Nor does product alone produce impact, but will do so if it is also a vehicle for process. This pattern of positive impact is consistently supported by evaluation data gathered by OTI Sri Lanka.

Additionally, many practitioners assume that process participants (especially trainees or workshop participants) will return to their village as 'change agents'. It is assumed that after a powerful and personally transformative experience in a workshop, the participant will return home and begin converting neighbours, friends, and family. Unfortunately, there is a trend for many workshop participants to experience a 're-entry effect'. Frequently, participants returning to communities after a successful workshop are vilified as traitors or derided as fools if they seek to express their new tolerance, or they fall back into old ways as the experience and enthusiasm of the workshop fade.

One way to ensure that people are able to navigate challenges of diffusion and re-entry successfully is to explicitly discuss and plan for this during workshop activities. How will people spread new awareness they have developed? How will they deal with challenges presented by being back in their former situations? By staying in touch and continuing interaction beyond the training or workshops, participants can support each other. By ensuring community-wide participation in project activities, the participants are less likely to be viewed as non-conforming or traitorous.

The Various Facilitated 'Process' Forms

Within the definition of process offered earlier, projects usually take several standard formats when designed by local partners. The following generic typology of process emerges organically when the OTI programme as a whole is examined. Understanding the 'process types' is useful for practitioners, given that they re-emerge time and again from one implementing partner to the next. Based on the evaluation of OTI programmes, here the process types are described and assessed in terms of their actual and potential effectiveness.

Training and skills-building processes: Training and peace education is probably the most common form of facilitated process when envisioned by local partners. Training produces some positive results, not least the acquisition of useful – and often necessary – skills. However, training alone is not usually a sufficient condition to produce impact. Training programmes often have unrealistic goals or create overly idealistic expectations of how people will contribute to social change after the training (the ‘diffusion problem’ discussed above). For training to have effective impact, first the skill and experience of the trainer are critical; second, participants need relevant, hands-on skills to apply beyond the workshop; third, training should be experiential rather than lecture-based; and finally, training should include components of conflict analysis, problem-solving and dialogue, giving participants the chance to relate this learning to the broader conflict context. A brief interview with trainers, a review of their training resume, and an examination of the training agenda, should help programme staff determine if planned training activities meet all of these criteria.

Exchange programmes: Among implementing partners – especially those that work with youth – exchange programmes are a perennial favourite, but they are often flawed because they rely on simple contact to produce impact. One reason identified for the absence of indicators for exchange programmes is that they fail to afford youth the opportunity to discuss among themselves the issues they care about. The programmes are designed and organised by adults around sports activities or song, dance and drama or arranged in ways that require little inter-personal engagement. Participants in a given project may not even speak the same languages. Exchange workshops have a positive impact when they make participants aware that

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representatives of other groups are not as alien or dangerous as had been assumed. Participants generally assess these programmes to have been fun – especially when they are residential exchange programmes that involve travel to distant locations – and express enthusiasm for taking part in other exchange programmes or facilitated activities. However, all other indicators tend to be absent and such programmes are generally assessed to have little or no positive impact. There are a number of reasons for this. First, in order for process to produce indicators of positive impact, it must be intensive; second, it must be sustained; and third – and most importantly – it must result in dialogue and discussion. It is actually this dialogue that programme staff should seek to ensure because it will ultimately succeed in breaking down stereotypes and building productive relationships.

When evaluating proposals for exchange programmes, project officers should focus on the intensity of the process, asking themselves how long and how intimately will the participants be together; what they will do together; and whether they will discuss the issues raised with the audience. It is important that interaction between groups contains elements of dialogue and discussion that raise issues, test assumptions and deflate stereotypes.

Finally, as reflective dialogue is the process activity sought, it may enhance effectiveness if training involves communication skills and peace paradigms. Language training, or at least provision for translation, is also useful if there is time. These components should be seen as legitimate cost items in the interest of enhancing overall impact of exchange programmes.

Dialogue processes: Dialogue brings together diverse community members for a variety of purposes: to analyse issues, discuss problems, create options, and identify solutions; to increase mutual understanding and counter stereotyping; and to build productive relationships. It may involve attempts to resolve local disputes or address particular conflict tensions through mediation or facilitated collective decision making; to analyse political



issues and share different perspectives with the aim of promoting greater respect and mutual understanding; or to increase awareness of the substantive issues underlying the conflict. Sometimes the purpose is to build a relationship and create mechanisms for sustainable problem solving, such as a local peace committee, or to develop ways of managing conflict events, assign roles and responsibilities and set up chains of communication between groups. Dialogue may be structured as an auxiliary tool in traditional development-type activities, such as participatory appraisals, developing inclusive and participatory criteria for selecting beneficiaries, or for allocating access to or

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managing joint community resources. It may also be used to facilitate buy-in to a project by community members or representatives in project planning and implementation. Such diverse goals may create variations in dialogue structure and timing, but the purpose of ensuring that people communicate effectively and work collaboratively to achieve common goals or derive mutual benefit remains the same. Dialogue is perhaps the single most effective mechanism for building peace and

transforming violent conflict at the community level, but it can lead to intensification of conflict, erosion of trust, and entrenchment of negative perceptions unless it is managed with skill. For this reason, it is often useful to begin a dialogue project with training in basic conflict resolution skills and paradigms. It is also useful – though not essential – for facilitators to have a degree of training or experience, especially if they intend to intervene in intense conflict. Again, it is recommended that programme staff review plans and resumes of key actors with a critical eye. Programme staff should be sceptical of unrealistic expectations – clear indications of a lack of experience.

An impact spectrum

Most projects that are developed for implementation at the community level will fall somewhere on a spectrum of process activities which constitute subsets of the three project types described above. This spectrum should not be viewed as a rigidly linear model, because a number of factors may interact to alter specific project design and impact. This spectrum of peace programming impact is shown below:

This spectrum is useful to help programme staff visualise types of projects likely to be submitted, and assess their prospects for positive impact. To increase impact, some activities may be synergistically combined. For instance, joint community development projects may include joint programme planning activities and problem-solving dialogue; community conflict management planning activities may contain a training and skills-building component before the onset of dialogue. Process activities may be synergistically combined in successive stages or by conducting several reinforcing activities simultaneously.

Conclusion

Among hands-on practitioners concerned with peacebuilding, there is frequent reference to the power of ‘process’ as a mechanism for changing conflict attitudes and perceptions.⁶ This concept is rarely defined, although most practitioners have a clear, intuitive grasp of what it is and how it works. I had difficulty identifying a working definition of ‘process’ as facilitators use it. Yet the overwhelming majority of community-level peacebuilding initiatives being funded by donors and implemented revolve around explicit or implicit

process-based models. This begs the question: if process is so important to the way most practitioners conceive of their practice, and is so widely applied in the ways projects are designed and implemented in the field, why is there so little rigorous discussion about it? And why such a dearth of research about why, or how exactly, 'process' works?

In my own experience – validated by monitoring and evaluation activities conducted by OTI Sri Lanka – a common thread is observable: the critical catalysing or accelerating variable for generating indicators of positive impact at the community level, in all the myriad ways these indicators can be articulated or defined, is the presence of rich process activities. The importance of a dual 'process and product' approach – as intentionally emphasised by OTI – is validated by all the data gathered for monitoring and evaluation purposes. This aspect of 'process' as a stimulating or accelerating agent remains consistent not only among diverse sorts of project activities, but also across diverse geographic regions.

It seems to be consistently the case, no matter what sort of project is being examined, that where process is strong, intensive, sustained, or skilfully facilitated, the impact indicators sought are clearly and powerfully evident. Conversely, where process is absent, short, superficial, or poorly facilitated – even if product implementation and delivery are ideal – the indicators sought appear minimally or not at all. Strong process predicts the strong presence of indicators. A key lesson learned is that regardless of the particular outputs of the project being generated, strong process-based activities must be present, either as a central activity or as a set of critical project sub-activities, if indicators of impact are to manifest.

Furthermore, a system for scoring the richness of process can be devised to reflect the factors critical to process success, notably: the nature, intensity and duration of interaction, the level of community participation, the skill and experience of facilitators, and the presence of reflective dialogue or training processes. It is postulated that a predictable and observable correlation will occur between a process score and the presence or absence of commonly used impact indicators. By testing this hypothesis, we as researchers and practitioners can systematise the necessary and/or sufficient programme components that lead to successful impact, and contribute to an improvement in practice that would benefit community-level peacebuilding interventions in relation to development-type activities.

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Endnotes

¹ 'USAID-OTI Programme Introduction Final 03-04', OTI Sri Lanka.

² The categories are: peacebuilding relevance; peacebuilding effectiveness; impact of macro peacebuilding; sustainability for long-term peacebuilding; participation and ownership of national/local stakeholders; coordination and coherence with other initiatives; efficiency, management and governance.

³ 'A Decade of Transition: 1994-2004':14; available at www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/transition_initiatives/pubs/oti_ten_yrrpt_04Nov16_final.pdf



⁴ For a detailed analysis of the actors, issues and discourse in southern Sinhalese politics, see Rampton & Welikala 2005.

⁵ Another survey which elicited positive feedback about the need for accurate and balanced information is the 'Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices Survey' undertaken by the Centre for Policy Alternatives (December 2004:35).

⁶ For a detailed discussion of this approach, and a compelling model of social organisation which justifies it, see Lederach 1997:37-61

⁷ Not to be confused with a 'peace process' as discussed by Lederach (1997: 63-71), which is a far more complex phenomenon.

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