

Summary of the MSP<sup>1</sup> Roundtable Discussion on  
“Supporting Peace Processes in South East Asia:  
How not to be a bull in a China shop?”  
with Emma Leslie, June 10, 2013 at swisspeace

## **Introduction**

Third parties' interventions to support conflict resolution in South East Asia have been rather rare in the last decades. Indeed, it has proven difficult for outsiders to play a facilitation or a mediation role in that part of the world and this for different reasons. Among some possible explanations: the perception of interference in internal affairs, the history of a colonial past impacting the present, and the mistrust towards foreigners. In particular, in comparison to most of the African conflict resolution cases, the interventions in South East Asia have been mostly locally conducted and space for outsiders is scarce.

Nevertheless some foreigners have found ways to contribute to support peace in that part of the world and Emma Leslie<sup>2</sup> is a stimulating example of this. She is currently involved in three peace processes across the region – the Moro Islamic Liberation Front/Philippine government; Karen National Union and Myanmar government; and the All Burma Students Democratic Front and Myanmar government. The Mediation Support Project (MSP) roundtable discussion therefore focused on the Philippines and Myanmar. Emma shared her experience on how to deal with those specific mediation/facilitation challenges and draw lessons from those cases.

## **Quintessence of the Roundtable**

In the following, we would like to highlight a few important observations that Emma shared during the roundtable.

### Multi-track diplomacy: still a useful concept?

While working on the Philippines and Myanmar peace processes it became obvious to Emma that there was a shift in some established concepts such as multi-track diplomacy. It has become difficult to determine who is at the table and who is not in an era where for instance Twitter and Facebook play a major role, being new tools to express and shift opinion as well as reach out for people's support. The conclusion behind these observations is that some of the old concepts need to be rethought and adapted to newly emerging contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> MSP is a joint project by swisspeace and the Center for Security Studies, ETH-Zurich.

<sup>2</sup> Emma Leslie, an Australian citizen, has worked on peace, conflict transformation and development throughout the Asia Pacific region since 1993. In 1997 she moved to Cambodia and in the same year helped to found the regional network of Action Asia, holding the post of Secretariat to the Action Asia network since then. In 2008, she founded the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies which she is directing today. Emma has extensive advisory experience and works as a consultant, practitioner and trainer on conflict transformation and peacebuilding issues in Asia. She has conducted a number of conflict analysis trainings in Eastern Europe, Africa and throughout Asia, holds a Masters degree in International Development and was one of the thousand peace women nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.

### International Contact Group: a potential strong new mediation support mechanism

In the Philippines, an International Contact Group (ICG), comprising of eight different international stakeholders<sup>3</sup> was set up to work together on supporting the mediation process led by Malaysia. The complementary nature of this group is very important as it allows different stakeholders to undertake different tasks and reach out to different actors. Depending on their background, for example, they can meet various people; NGOs can set up talks with proscribed groups while only stakeholders with a diplomatic background will be able to arrange meetings with parliamentarians or senior political figures. All of them have different protocols to follow, different networks that they can tap into and different technical expertise. Separately, they most probably would not be very powerful but together they have a wide range of influence. Confidentiality and reporting to each other are just two prerequisites in such a constellation. Emma, who is part of this group as Conciliation Resources representative, advocates for more such arrangements in peace processes.

### Analysis: your intervention is as good as your analysis is

It has always been emphasized that analysis builds the core of every engagement, even more so in conflict-prone contexts. The difficulty often lies in the time frame, according to Emma. In-depth analysis needs a considerable amount of time to be done accurately and therefore runs the risk of being out-dated at the time it becomes a working tool. In the Rakhine state, in Myanmar, for example, different actors use different analyses, some of them too old, talking about issues that do not reflect the reality on the ground anymore. International stakeholders working on peace processes need to be aware that the ground moves much faster than most of the organizations' work and that there is a need to adapt their analysis again and again.

### Emotional Intelligence: a key to a successful mediation

Besides having a good analysis at hand and knowing the applicable technical concepts well, Emma found that what her organization brought to the table in the three current peace processes was an understanding of the personalities as well as where they stand and why. Emotional intelligence, in this specific context the capability to show empathy as well as to identify and interpret one's and others' emotions, plays an important role in the success of peace processes. The difficulty for the mediator is to be impartial and try to empathize with both sides. Practical experience reveals that it is not easy to switch off one's feeling against or for some of the parties. In general, there are always a lot of emotions behind peace talks; for instance the transformation of military personnel to civilians who need to admit responsibility for what they have done during wartime is very difficult and implicates a lot of emotions that need to be dealt with, also during official peace processes. Emotions should neither be forced nor manipulated but rather "naturalized". This can change the whole dynamics of a peace talk, creating space where people feel more comfortable and free to communicate.

### Trust building: a challenging but essential element for the mediator

After sometimes decades of fighting, the level of suspicion between the parties and towards third parties is high and trust building therefore an essential aspect of any peace process. While experts tend to agree to the overall concept, the more pressing question is how to translate it into practice. Derived from Emma's experiences, trust building is essentially about being transparent, flexible, timely and reliable. A workable relationship can only be achieved by being as transparent as possible; each person should be as much aware as possible of what everybody else is doing and this strategy needs to apply to all relevant parties. This also implies that the local, national and international organizations involved openly share information about their activities, their future plans, how they understand the context and assess the current situation etc. After a while, parties may open up and become ready to fully engage. Flexibility is another requirement; if workshops need to be postponed, money transfer halts etc., organizations need to prove their flexibility to make things work. Parties respond very well to such flexibility, according to Emma's experience.

### Ego: Throw your ego through the window to do this job well!

In peace talks, there is usually a lot of small work to be done in the background. This work is often not glamorous and at this point, organizations are well advised to take their ego out of the picture. Too much work is usually driven by the ego - this can be well observed in the context of Myanmar where the field is very

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<sup>3</sup> The ICG is comprised of four countries: Japan, UK, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and four international NGOs: Muhammadiyah, the Asia Foundation, the HD Centre and Conciliation Resources. It is the first of its kind where NGOs and diplomats work together in a formal and permanent setting.

crowded and many organizations aim for a big breakthrough instead of gradual change. As Dekha Ibrahim Abdi<sup>4</sup> used to say “Throw your ego through the window to do this job well!”

#### Humor: a potential support to change dynamics

Humor in peace processes should not be underestimated; sometimes a joke or a simple laughing together can change the whole dynamic in an intense peace talk. This can end a deadlock in the talks or simply helps people to see each other from a different angle.

#### Time perception: how long are you ready to sit at the peace table?

How people deal with time is always different from one culture to another. Especially in peace processes, time is significant but perceived differently, not necessarily only because of different cultural backgrounds but because of a different agendas, histories and expected outcomes of negotiations. For instance, rebel groups who have been fighting for several years or even decades are willing to engage in peace talks as long as it is necessary for them to reach what they aspired during their struggle. Governments, on the other hand, usually think in terms of period of office and are seeking a quick fix. Mostly, finding a quick solution is also the view inherent to most outsiders involved in the peace processes.

#### The local way?

Although countries like Myanmar allow most peace support organizations to enter<sup>5</sup>, the government never tires of insisting that they will handle the peace talks on their own (‘the Burmese way’). This also coincides with the notion that in Myanmar a focus on the mediator is not desirable at that stage. Respecting the local response to crisis is essential and giving value and support to local actors is one of the most sustainable ways to operate.

#### Mediation support vs mediation

Although mediation support is not always seen as the preferred kind of assistance by donors and international organizations, it is in reality often more pertinent for the process than mediation per se. Every peace process needs people behind the scenes, specific technical expertise and brokers that are able to do the necessary ‘translation work’ as misunderstandings arise very often. Structures like the ICG in the Philippines are innovative mechanisms to support a mediation team and should be developed in other places.

#### Conclusion

During the inputs of Emma, it became apparent that not all skills can be acquired through professional training. With regard to emotional intelligence and trust building, intuition and personality can tilt the balance. Besides this important lesson, requiring a certain amount of practical experience in the field of peace processes, Emma clearly argued for a more comprehensive and coherent approach within the international community, advocating for set-ups similar to the International Contact Group in the Philippines. Mediation support to local actors, rather than leading the process, should be an inspiration for the international community, and stakeholders should be aware of the long-term commitment that an engagement in peace processes brings about.

The Mediation Support Project would like to thank Emma Leslie for dedicating her time and sharing some of her lessons learnt with the audience. We are looking forward to further collaboration.

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<sup>4</sup> Dekha Ibrahim Abdi was “a global peacemaker from rural Kenya. She was engaged in peace work and conflict resolution in many of the world's most divided countries. Her comprehensive methodology combined grassroots activism, a soft but uncompromising leadership, and a spiritual motivation drawing on the teachings of Islam” (from <http://rightlivelivelihood.org/abdi.html>)

<sup>5</sup> But do not allow them to register as NGO and enter all areas of the country (restrictions).