

Learning from communities that prevent conflict

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PEOPLE ARE NOT COMMITTED to war. Even in the midst of terrible conflicts that seem to sweep up entire countries or regions, there are often communities that exempt themselves – successfully – from the violence and the modes of the conflict around them.

The Steps Toward Conflict Prevention Project (STEPS) is a collaborative learning project doing case studies on these communities, looking for common themes among the strategies they employ, at how they succeed and why they fail. In early 2005, a group of humanitarian workers, peace workers and academics gathered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to discuss these issues and these communities through the lens of ten cases that they had written.

The cases look at communities that have developed successful and coherent strategies for avoiding conflict. This does not mean that violence does not come to these communities, nor that they themselves avoid all participation in violence. But they are communities that have taken a conscious and articulated stand with regard to their particular conflict that they will not participate in its modes and mind-sets.

STEPS is still in its early stages, still pulling together evidence, and still gathering the common threads from among the cases. The recent consultation marked a learning point along the way and identified some elements that are important in all these communities. A few of these are described below.

Identity

Identity and the ways in which communities employ it to create cohesion are seen as overarching themes of all the cases. Identity is a large issue and consists of many elements; indeed, each of us has many



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Some "peace communities" in Colombia seek to resist a culture of violence.

identities. The challenge for STEPS is to examine the identities at work in a community, and to see how they are deployed by that community in the service of local actions to prevent the conflict.

What seems to happen in the STEPS communities is that they make a conscious choice about which identity to emphasise. In "this conflict" and in "this place", they choose to emphasise an identity (or identities) that leads them away from active involvement in the violence. Often these identities are not new ones, but build upon one of the range of possible identities already existing. Further, they are expressly chosen as part of a strategy for avoiding the conflict.

There are two main ways that communities express this choice.

The first is through consolidating an identity around a particular issue that leads them to avoid the purpose of the conflict that surrounds them. For example, the city of Tuzla in Bosnia avoided the ethnic cleansing that characterised the war in the Balkans in part through a strong emphasis on being Tuzlan. The Tuzlan identity superseded ethnic identity and gave people the opportunity to find connections rather than concentrate on divisions.

The second way communities consolidate an identity is to be explicitly against the violence. This is