

# Reconciliation as Activity: Opportunities for Action

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### **Reconciliation as Activity: Opportunities for Action**

Attempts at reconciliation face a significant obstacle: local publics and elites, the intended beneficiaries of the process, are rejecting the concept. The label of reconciliation has become an impediment to organisations, who must use it to gain funding, but find it hampers their work in the field. They experience outright hostility if they label their projects as reconciliatory. The problem is pervasive in Kosovo: the public feel that reconciliation projects were started too early, that they are unclear and that they favour one side of the conflict. The effect is that organisations struggle to conduct their work and that those individuals who do take part in these efforts need to do so away from their local ethnic communities, who do not permit such interactions.

The London School of Economics and Political Science together with the Centre for Research, Documentation and Publication (CRDP), as a part of the “Art and Reconciliation: Conflict, Culture and Community” project – funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), under the Conflict Theme of the *Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research* (PaCCS) and through the *Global Challenges Research Fund* (GCRF) – held a collaborative workshop in Prishtina on 05 March 2018 to tackle this topic. It addressed this acute problem by reframing reconciliation as activity. Participants provided numerous examples of activities that occur in societies, sometimes labelled as reconciliatory and sometimes not, which lead to better relations between groups. Our findings highlight the roles of young generations, language and informal interactions.

### **Background**

The post-1999 Kosovo Albanian and Serb communities are in a state best described as frozen conflict. The transition from conflict to peace did not result in a peace agreement, in any unified domestic peacebuilding domestic effort or in an era of peace. The claims for statehood by Kosovo Albanians and the resistance to such efforts by Serbs, as well as their own claims to autonomy, both persist and are hotly contested. Interethnic relations remain precarious, despite efforts by the United Nations and, more recently, the European Union to normalise them.

### **Research**

Examples from many post-conflict societies worldwide highlight that reconciliation as a concept is distrusted and rejected by victims of violence (Rosoux 2013). Anecdotal and survey evidence has proven this to be the case in Kosovo (Ahmetaj et al. 2017). The rejection of the concept raises questions about reconciliation efforts. Are current approaches to reconciliation useful? Are alternative approaches available, and if so, what are they? We propose that activities involving different ethnic groups – by individuals or groups, organised or unorganised – can improve relations between formerly opposed groups, by increasing trust and familiarity, while decreasing fear and negative stereotypes of the other.

We find support for our argument in global examples that have yet to be studied systematically. Nonetheless, all point to the potential for positive intergroup outcomes based on activities. These activities can be informal and not targeted specifically at reconciliation, such as routine activities of mothers walking, shopping and playing with their children in Belfast (Smyth and MacKnight 2013); high school flirting in Mostar (Hromadžić 2015); and, tourism in a variety of global locations (Farmaki 2017). In

Kosovo, such interactions have been observed in shopping centres and swimming pools (Fridman 2015), as well as in the informal economy (Kostovicova et al. 2012). They can also occur in formal, reconciliation-focused activities, but as a by-product of interaction. For example, in UN-led conflict resolution training for Syrians, participants who are adversaries in the conflict rejected calls for reconciliation, but through cooperation during the workshop developed a functional cooperation to solve mutual problems, despite their antagonisms (Arai 2013). These activities can lead to the development of “thin sympathy”, or the basic understanding of the needs of the other (Quinn 2016). This is missed by traditional approaches to reconciliation, which are burdened by expectations and connotations that hamper the work of civil society organisations. The premise behind our new approach is that activities that involve contact between different groups – be it physical or symbolic (for example, exposure to symbols of the other group in the realm of arts and culture), intentional or unintentional – can lead to positive outcomes for intergroup relations.

### **Workshop**

The workshop in Prishtina was attended by representatives of local and international civil society organisations, who conduct a range of activities within communities and across ethnic lines. Some worked directly with reconciliation issues (for example, coming to terms with the past), but many did not (for example, youth dialogue programmes). Together we shared experiences of the types of activity that can lead to better intergroup outcomes and what about these activities makes them conducive to transforming intergroup relationships. We asked if this concept was useful, and if it was not, what concept would be more useful for practitioners? Participants readily admitted that the label of reconciliation had become problematic for their work, which was often received with hostility if the word was used. On the other hand, they provided numerous examples of activities they had undertaken that did not have this label, but that had resulted in improved relations between groups. These included youth exchanges; assistance to victims of torture during and after the conflict (for example in police custody); and, women’s rights initiatives.

### **Three Key Recommendations**

*Language learning* – English is being used as a lingua franca between young Albanians and Serbs, but Serbs in Kosovo lag behind in their knowledge of the language. Structural constraints, such as the ghettoization of minorities, different educational systems and regional divergence in state capacity within Kosovo made it easier for organisations to conduct activities between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs from Serbia, rather than with Kosovo Serbs. Further investment in English language teaching for Serb youth in Kosovo, to balance educational outcomes, is necessary to improve the capacity for communication between the groups. Without this foundation, projects cannot connect youths within Kosovo. This also means that using English as a working language in these projects helps interethnic relations. This should not, however, divert attention from the politically-sanctioned segregated education systems, which result in neither ethnic group speaking the other group’s language. This is the more significant and underlying problem, which warrants long-term attention.

*Youth* – Young people are keen to take part in activities across ethnic lines, including in each other’s communities, if they involve the pursuit of shared interests in art, culture, language, sports and

other non-political subjects. Individuals begin to discuss politics and history in the socialisation that surrounds these activities (over meals, coffee or drinks). Many organisations defined success in their work as educating young people about opportunities to travel, to converse with other groups and, sometimes, as enabling such travel and exchanges. This calls for further investment in activities that do not traditionally fall under the label of reconciliation but bring young people together. These activities are cost-effective and often already exist, but can be expanded across ethnic lines and, if possible, involve travel within Kosovo. The findings support the work of the Kosovo Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), but our recommendation is to expand on these efforts. The Kosovo Regional Youth Cooperation Office uses the label of reconciliation, which we find problematic since it can limit participation to individuals already open to other ethnic groups, and it forms a part of a regional exchange effort, while we recommend to also focus on exchanges within Kosovo and within still divided districts.

*Informality* – Much of the activity with positive intergroup outcomes occurred in the informal domain. Civil society organisations believed there was a readiness to reconcile, observed through informal activities that bred familiarity and liking, but that these were obstructed by societally defined boundaries and reproduced by formal institutions. The effect was that individuals often made friends with members of the other ethnicity in the informal setting or away from their home, only for these interactions to be sanctioned by their own community and ethnicity. Improvement in intergroup relations can occur on the margins of activities, whether or not they are explicitly reconciliatory. Crucially, however, individuals should not be removed from their communities, in order to encourage local societal change.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Experience from Kosovo, as well as further afield, has shown that the label of reconciliation is distrusted and rejected by publics, thereby hampering the work of organisations trying to improve interethnic relations. Based on global case studies, we propose that activities that involve different ethnic groups, whether they are intended to be reconciliatory or not, have a greater potential for positive intergroup outcomes. NGOs in Kosovo provided numerous examples of such activities, not conducted under the label of reconciliation, but which improved intergroup relations. We provide three key recommendations based on these findings. First, further investment is needed in English language teaching for Serb youth in Kosovo, in order to improve the potential for communication between groups. Second, projects should focus on younger generations, who often discuss politics and history in the socialisation that occurs outside of formal activities. Third, much of the improvement in relations occurs at the margins of activities, but it is crucial that individuals are not removed from their communities in order for this to occur.

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