Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum

Tools for preventing and transforming conflict: *Media projects and communication strategies*

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Responding to the horror of ethnic conflict, international NGOs like Internews and Search for Common Ground and government organizations like USAID have developed and supported media projects and communication strategies for preventing violence (and the recurrence of violence) in societies that are vulnerable to civic conflict, ethnic strife and repressive rule. This month's CPRF explored the role of innovative, independent media projects, such as locally programmed radio and television stations, as a catalyst for positive change and conflict prevention. The panelists considered questions such as: how can media effect change and enhance peacebuilding? How are communication strategies developed and their efficacy for conflict prevention and transformation? What local or state resistance do these strategies generate or encounter? And, what systemic factors must be addressed – social, political cultural – to insure long-term success? The panel included Deborah Jones, Director of Acquisitions and Development, Common Ground Productions, Search for Common Ground (SFCG), Adam Kaplan, Media Advisor in the Office of Transition Initiatives, USAID and Ivan Sigal, Regional Director of Asia, Internews. Charles Dambach, Director of the Alliance for Peacebuilding and a sponsor of the Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum moderated the forum.

The panelist identified key objectives to consider when working with media in post conflict situations, as well as the opportunities and challenges of working to promote free press in emerging democracies and nascent nation states. It was stated that people who have survived a conflict, or a series of conflicts, often loose a sense of power and self-determination; media projects such as those developed by SFCG, work to return power and feelings of self-determination to the people. They do this by working with local people to create and produce radio and television shows that are by and for local people, focusing on issues that are important and meaningful within the society. The goal of these media projects, as articulated by the panelists, is to create programs which model the kind of behavior that, if reproduced in the society at large, can contribute to deeper understanding and the transformation of conflictual situations. It was also stated that these programs and initiatives are part of a process – producing one show about reconciliation does not lead to reconciliation, it must be part of a larger multi-initiative effort. It was also recognized by the panel that organizations must focus on supporting local communities to assume all responsibility – be it a community newspaper, television or radio station; sustainability as a long-term goal must be recognized and considered.

The panelists spoke to the importance of addressing media ownership and listenership and how these two often intertwine in ways that can present challenges. Four distinct areas were identified as being critical when defining where and how a new media endeavor will prove possible or impossible. Political will is the first aspect that must be present – is the government supportive of open media and what are the rules that govern new community media? Second, the relative fragility of a country's situation is something that must be taken into consideration. For instance, there are often actors (like

political combatants or newly formed emerging governments) who may want to reduce opportunities for free press and community media to flourish. Third, there must be a level of trust given to local communities in regards to owning and controlling media projects and programs; integrity is also paramount when establishing community programming. Finally, several questions must be address including: who owns the media and who gets to decide ownership? How should the media be used? Should media programming be censored, and if so to what degree? Will free press (and a plethora of voices) undermine an emerging nation state, or should there be one "normative" voice to ensure stability and order? It was pointed out that these questions and their answers are intrinsically conflict laden and must be taken very seriously and reevaluated often.

The panelists agreed that the mission of many organizations working with media and communication strategies is two fold. On the one hand, media can be used to bring people together through innovative programming as well as used to disseminate critical information—for instance upcoming elections and voting instructions. In addition, it is also the mission of many organizations to support media as an institution and develop long-term goals that work to help the sustainability of stations, newsrooms and their initiatives. Another aspect that organizations and those they are working with should be aware of is the environment of regulation. If there is no regulation media outlets are free to emerge. Yet there is the danger that in post-conflict zones and emerging nation states different community media stations and community newspapers will engage in divisive programming, fueling conflicts based on religion, ethnicity, and nationalism. Organizations must encourage new media to work for the common good and to build common ground. The panelist also spoke about media projects and programs that are being done internationally – cross-nations – both the positive results of these initiatives and the difficulty in identifying donors willing to fund cross-boarder work. It was explained that SFCG has been engaged in working along the boarders of conflicts rather then the boarders of countries. Thus, much of the work being done ultimately touches on cross-cultural and cross-national issues without having to be defined as "international".

Finally, the panelists analyzed effective tools and skills needed when communities begin to develop and run media stations and newsrooms. The list includes the ability to develop interesting and relevant content; how to sell commercial/advertisement time (if there is advertising in the country); how to literally run the station or pressroom; and, how to identify sources of funding – especially long-term donor funding. For countries that do not have a strong commercial presence, stations must learn to sell their time (segments of the broadcast) and then, eventually, to sell their listenership.

The panelists, along with the questions and responses from the audience, made clear that media, in the many forms it takes, is a powerful and important tool for addressing the myriad levels of conflict, as well as a tool for the prevention, transformation and resolution of conflicts. Because of the versatility and potential influence of the media, organizations working to develop and promote media in countries emerging from conflict/s or in the midst of governmental change have tremendous opportunities and responsibilities to consider as they move forward with their work.