Supporting Local Leaders Working for Peace and Democracy in a Conflicted World: The Living Legacy of Raymond Shonholtz and Howard Wolpe

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Speakers:

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Two legends of the democracy and peacebuilding community, Raymond Shonholtz and Howard Wolpe, have left an enduring legacy of social change at home and abroad.

Howard and Raymond: Building Peace

In his inspiring work, Howard Wolpe believed that people, not institutions, regulatory mechanisms, sanctions, or power politics, are the key to resolving conflicts. Admittedly, sanctions, interventions (civil and military), and deal-making can be necessary, but after the violence has subsided the human element must be engaged. No matter the issue, people can cooperate on their various interests and can overcome their divisions. Thus, conflict resolution and peacebuilding is not a process of coercion, but rather helping leaders realize that their self-interest can be more effectively advanced through a collaborative process.

The mission was to shift how leaders define and understand their self-interest and transform the way people view each other and perceive the problems faced by States and individuals. This was a new concept in the conflict management field and developing approaches of participatory and transformative conflict resolution was often received with cynicism.

With the belief that people were the key to building peace, the approach was to engage with all leaders and change the way they thought about each other in order for collective cooperation to
During this process, a key issue was identified in the conflict situation in Burundi that could be summed up in one word: trust.

An approach that turned out to be quite effective was to ask the various conflicting parties who they thought were important persons to engage during peacebuilding exercises. This allowed Howard and others to tackle the issue of (mis)trust and challenge the perceptions and identities the parties had of each other. A database was formed of actors that could then be cross-referenced to identify the most frequent persons mentioned and thus create a network of participation and dialogue. Ultimately, this brought together fellow Burundians who were collectively seen as essential to the peacebuilding cause and garnered the process some legitimacy.

Although techniques and process can alter from one conflict to the next, this approach has proven effective in cases thus far and shows that it is the human factor and people, not power, that build a nation.

Through Raymond’s work and Partners for Democratic Change, he supported local leaders from their partner networks and centers. Rather than establishing field offices, they would identify and build relationships with local organizations, leaders, and entrepreneurs. An unconventional practice at the time, they found leaders with entrepreneurial spirit to build local capacity and skills. Those local leaders were then supported through technical capacity efforts. The challenge, of course, was actually finding local partners. Those partners and leaders would have access to, as well as the legitimacy to work with, different sectors of their society, such as the general public, private sector, political elites, and communities.

Raymond and Partners for Democratic Change created a global network of leaders and local organizations that had to work together. That partnering with local organizations developed into a framework of multilateralism. The global platform for conflict resolution grew stronger through that multilateralism. The ingenuity of the organization permeated through the multiple levels of peacebuilding establishing relations between the United Nations, states, and civil society.

From the perspective of USAID, in response to the approach toward local leaders, having people established on the ground for long periods of time and in places the US doesn’t particularly prioritize as a national security concern can benefit the peacebuilding process.

The work and influence of Raymond and Howard promoted a sense of human interaction and what was called “relational responsibility,” where the human element is invoked to enlarge the degree of liberty in a situation where conflict constrains. For instance, the issue of spoilers is only present in a system that excludes certain actors involved in a conflict. That system is
incapable of incorporating “spoilers”. Interactivity brings those “spoilers” back into the process so that everyone is included.

**Implications for the Future of Peacebuilding and Democracy**

A common issue in peacebuilding is that of the response of local partners to foreign and especially US interventions, implying that interveners “go fix their own problems.” This sentiment was acknowledged by others in the peacebuilding field. Some noted that multilateralism can help address this situation. For example, the US may not always be able to take the moral high ground in certain circumstances (e.g. drug trafficking, climate change) due to their own stance and policy on those issues. However, organizational networks and multilateral structures can bring together people and organizations that support each other and construct a dialogue to move past those barriers.

With regard to justice and peace in the peacebuilding framework Raymond and Howard helped establish, it was suggested that allowing the local people to decide for themselves which direction they would pursue first will create space for locally-developed solutions best suited to the needs of the community. Furthermore, when a decision comes from within local communities rather than coerced from outside, it is more likely to be accepted.

On the subject of lessons learned, the practice of monitoring and evaluation is generally accepted as a vital part of peacebuilding. However, much of the information and reports produced can lead to data overload for many practitioners in the field. Face-to-face conversations to gain lessons learned has proven more efficient and desirable, although logistically more cumbersome than field reports. At times there also seems to be a competition between organizations regarding knowledge sharing. Monitoring and evaluation teams may be reluctant to divulge details of their practices and techniques.

**Conclusions**

The opportunity to reflect on the impact of the work and influence of Howard and Raymond reminds us that we need to be bold in our interactions and as one panelist said, “to be good citizens” in the face of the complexities conflict creates. In the face of challenges presented in the peacebuilding field, it seems necessary to learn from what we and others are doing in order to learn how to succeed in difficult circumstances. Ultimately, creating space for peacebuilding and dialogue is a sustainable way to save lives as well as change attitudes and practices.