

“A More Excellent Way:” Developing Coalitions and Consensus through Informal Networking

ALISON GILCHRIST *

Introduction

In a speech defending non-violent resistance during the American civil rights struggle, Martin Luther King asserted to his detractors, “*we have to find a more excellent way,*” which seeks “*not to annihilate, but to convert.*” On another occasion, he argued for the need to “*win the hearts and minds*” of the enemy in order to achieve the dream of civil rights and racial equality.

This article similarly advocates a view of community development which aims to create and maintain the conditions in which people with different identities and competing interests can manage disagreements, resolve conflicts and come to celebrate their own diversity. This is not a model which promotes appeasement or bland assimilation. Rather it incorporates a radical strategy of community empowerment: community workers using their skills, experience and imagination to support individuals and voluntary associations in developing a collective commitment and ability to articulate and debate controversies and settle conflicts without recourse to majority imposition, manipulation or violent confrontation. In contrast to models of community development which emphasise skills training and the setting up of formal organisations, the approach presented here places particular value on inter-personal relationships and informal networks as crucial elements of a community’s capacity to involve people in decision-making and to take collective action.

This is especially relevant in situations in which different communities co-habit a geographical area, where there may be pressure on scarce resources and where the different groupings believe that they have (or should have) equal rights of access to these. This article argues that in these circumstances, which are a common experience for many British community workers deployed in inner city areas, strategies for conflict resolution must be based on the establishment and nurturing of relationships which are authentic, holistic and sustainable.

* Alison Gilchrist teaches at the University of the West of England. Contact address: Faculty of Health and Social Care, UWE, Bristol St Matthias Campus, Oldbury Court Road, Fishponds, Bristol, BS16 2JP, UK.

Conflict is deeply embedded in society, even to the point that it is treated as culturally 'normal.' Inequalities are explained (even justified) as due to differences arising from class position, 'race' and culture, gender, age, sexual orientation and physical or mental impairments. Oppression and discrimination are perpetuated through personal attitudes, cultural mores and institutional practices. They are manifest in:

- a) unequal opportunities in social, economic and political arenas;
- b) communal discord and sectarian divisions;
- c) prejudices and antagonisms between different 'categories' of people; and
- d) low self-esteem, frustration and poor mental health for many individuals.

As a result, society fragments, certain sections of the populations are marginalised and 'ordinary people' become less able and willing to participate in those civil activities and local voluntary associations which are traditionally used to mediate conflicts and settle disputes (Burns, et al, 1994).

Community workers often find themselves as 'trouble-shooters,' assigned to deal with situations of actual or impending crisis. Tensions smoulder between different sections of the community. There is mutual intolerance, sometimes fear, resulting in marginalisation and occasional confrontation. Communities feel that their identities, esteem, opportunities and interests are threatened or constrained by the 'Other.' Nevertheless there is not total separation; people (especially at neighbourhood level) continue to interact in the course of everyday life and to some extent remain inter-dependent (at least at the micro-economic level). None of the parties can reasonably be expected to withdraw from the situation, whilst each has a legitimate claim to stay. Local disputes are frequently related to perceived 'fairness' in terms of access to influence, provision of services, rights of participation and the equitable distribution of resources. Personal experience takes on a political, more collective dimension by which institutional discrimination becomes entwined with people's expectations and behaviour.

Conflict may not necessarily erupt as full-scale civil war, street riots or ethnic cleansing, such as recent history has witnessed in Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Los Angeles or South Africa. It is nonetheless damaging for the individuals and communities involved. People are denied civil rights, they fail to achieve their potential, they are harassed and abused, and experience sporadic low-level hostility from their neighbours.

The core purpose of community development is to encourage and enable people to organise collectively to tackle issues which affect their lives. An important feature of community development is therefore its emphasis on the processes of informal education and mobilisation, incorporating principles of equality, empowerment and self-determination. The ways in which people relate to and communicate with one another are clearly crucial aspects of this approach if it is to achieve its aim of a more egalitarian and participative democracy.

The Bristol Festival Against Racism

This section describes an initiative which took place in a medium-sized multi-racial city in England. It illustrates the significance of personal contacts and informal networking in developing an active coalition in what could be seen as a contentious area of British politics. The first Bristol Festival Against Racism consisted of a programme of over 100 events and activities organised by a range of different communities and organisations across the city over a period of 6 weeks in the late summer of 1994. It was coordinated through an overtly political body, the local Anti-Racist Alliance, but using community development principles to involve people in decision-making and to encourage them to organise their own events. The explicit intention of the Festival was to work in partnership and solidarity with individuals and organisations to demonstrate opposition to racist ideas in all aspects of life in this city.

Four central themes were chosen to convey a basic message of anti-racism, namely: Equality, Justice, Diversity and Solidarity. At the same time, four aims were adopted which were:

- to provide opportunities for people in communities throughout Bristol to become involved in some kind of anti-racist activity;
- to explore Bristol's Black history and celebrate the diversity of cultures and experience within the city's population;
- to demonstrate the strength of anti-racist feeling and commitment across Bristol and to establish networks for future campaigning, support and solidarity; and
- to encourage debate and discussion on how an antiracist movement could be developed in the area.

These were widely publicised and provided a framework, or "script," which could be adapted to fit all kinds of events organised during the Festival's short 'season.' Since there was only very limited funding available, participants needed to organise activities which were within their own resources, capabilities and predilections. They were however assisted in linking up with others and advised to provide access and facilities for people who might otherwise be excluded or disadvantaged. Thus the coordinating group attempted to create or consolidate connections across organisational and identity boundaries so as to facilitate collaboration and the breaking down of barriers which divided different groups within the city.

Local knowledge of formal networks provided free access to major communication channels across the city's civil society, through mailings, newsletters and attendance at meetings. Informal networking allowed rapid (though often

serendipitous) connections to be made with potential supporters and participants (Melucci, 1988; Tarrow, 1994;). These personal contacts and relationships expedited access to funding, political support, expertise and practical resources. The simple motifs gave the Festival a deep moral resonance, whilst the individual reputations of the core organisers, as reliable political activists with known integrity, lent the initiative a degree of legitimacy which encouraged wide participation. Trust and respect, built up over several years of local involvement in community and political movements, were clearly factors in easing people into endorsing the idea of the Festival and becoming active participants.

The Festival attracted an amazing diversity of response. There was substantial media coverage and a widely distributed programme listing over 100 events. These ranged from quite closely-targeted community activities to large-scale conferences and public meetings. There were exhibitions, concerts, training workshops, political debates, religious services, sports activities, play days, communal cooking and eating, educational work with young people in schools and youth clubs, performing arts events and cultural celebrations, including one street party. These incorporated numerous examples of joint initiatives whereby temporary partnerships and coalitions were developed or expanded.

An evaluation exercise (Gilchrist, 1994) carried out immediately afterwards suggested that the Festival themes had indeed provided an appropriate focus around which people could connect, organise and contribute. It enabled cross-organisational links to be reinforced, thus overcoming to some extent a sense of isolation and fragmentation that many people had experienced in relation to anti-racist work. A hitherto invisible alliance emerged into the public domain, spanning the broad spectrum of civil society and linking individuals on the basis of shared values, and a commitment to racial equality. It has inspired and laid the foundation for future anti-racist campaigning and cooperation around a number of related issues. The community development approach of the Festival coordinators, distributing responsibility and control through the networks to devolve power as far as possible to those actually organising activities, ensured that the 1994 Festival was not a 'one-off' event, but that its impact on the city would reverberate for quite a while.

A year on from the first Festival, interviews were conducted with the 6 individuals involved in the organisational core and with an equal number of people who had arranged events as part of the Festival programme. It became clear that personal connections and informal one-to-one contact had been important factors in initiating and sustaining people's commitment. These relationships had underpinned the organisation with credibility, accountability and a mutual understanding which continues to operate within and across more formal structures, even though the Anti-Racist Alliance itself has ceased to exist.

There was a strong, though not explicit, emphasis on the values of transparency, subsidiarity, inclusion, voluntarism and pluralism. Planning meetings were open and widely publicised. Events were largely organised independently with support – but not interference – from the coordinators. Resources were allocated from the core funds so that activities could be accessible to people who might otherwise be excluded from attendance. Participation was entirely voluntary, mostly unpaid, and no restrictions were imposed on the kinds of events which could be incorporated under the Festival ‘umbrella.’

The intention was for the Festival to construct an organic and enduring “*civic space*” (Taylor, 1997), in which the goal of racial equality was hegemonic. Across this space a web of personal and organisational affiliations was woven which could support critical dialogue, manage potential and actual collaboration, and promote collective empowerment. It was an attempt to create an ‘anti-racist’ community, which could tolerate disagreements whilst enhancing mutual understanding and loyalty. The strategy of informal and opportunistic networking was both efficient and effective in reaching those who might want to contribute and in establishing a flexible, but secure base from which to organise. Furthermore, the development of trusting and respectful relationships amongst all those involved was a valued outcome which could not have been achieved through a more formal and centralised approach.

Connecting Communities

The Bristol Festival Against Racism demonstrated that community development can offer some guiding principles for working towards conflict resolution in situations where there are tensions and discord within a broad community or geographical area. Lessons from case studies reported elsewhere in this issue of the JSDA emphasise the importance of peace-building and community development in circumstances of deep social schism and ingrained violence. These conflicts are the historical residue of colonial exploitation and oppression, justified on grounds of racial superiority. Wherever possible, community development aims for a non-violent settlement of disputes. It offers strategies for maintaining peaceful co-existence whilst moving towards justice. There is a need to move beyond situations where popular protest is countered by state repression, in order to establish processes and procedures for negotiation and compromise. The pre-requisites for this are twofold: the acknowledgement of the roots of the conflict and a challenge to the power differentials that have caused or perpetuated the problem. Community development suggests the means to “*harmonise the social environment*” to attain a level of stability in which the causes of the conflict can be constructively analysed and re-framed as a positive challenge for social transformation (Sachane, 1997).

Too often the emphasis on capacity-building, the training of mediation skills or setting up of partnership forums neglects personal relationships and informal networks. Even in times of conflict, communities retain some inter-dependence. Borders are crossed (eg, Bradbury, 1994), goods and services are exchanged, even romance blossoms. It is interesting to note that women are often the prime actors in maintaining the "normality" of these inter-changes (Longland, 1994). Formal structures and procedures can impede progress because they become a focus for power struggles, generating a whole new stream of dissent. Instead, community development workers should operate as, 'imaginative diplomats,' combining roles of mediator, advocate, adviser and organiser. Their aim is to create and then foster safe opportunities through which individuals from each 'side' can meet, work together around non-contentious issues and gradually build up relationships that are based not on immediate antagonism or distrust, but rather on "shared aspirations" (Camplisson & Hall, 1996), "reasonable consensus" (Norman, 1993) and "successful collaboration" (Harbour, et al, 1996).

Re-vitalising Relationships

Drawing on these reports and direct experience of community development within a multi-racial neighbourhood, a 'twelve-step' model of conflict resolution is proposed which outlines a series of phases through which people move from a position of mutual hostility through to an agreed settlement. The key to this approach is the proactive formation of connections between people and the vitality of relationships which develop as a result.

Step One – Recognition

There is an awareness of the conflict as a problem and a shared desire to change the situation.

Step Two – Tolerance

The parties to the conflict accept and tolerate each other's existence, acknowledging that they all have some rights and responsibilities in dealing with issues arising from the conflict.

Step Three – Information Exchange

Communication is established between the parties, allowing them to exchange information and develop knowledge of each other.

Step Four – Dialogue

The parties enter into discussion, learning about their different experiences and grievances in relation to the conflict. Dialogue allows analysis to develop, but not necessarily consensus.

Step Five – Empathy

At a personal level, individuals from different sides of the conflict begin to understand each other's perspectives and to empathise with one another.

Step Six – Mediation

Through further discussion, possibly mediated by an 'outsider,' areas of agreement are highlighted which address common concerns and identify shared values.

Step Seven – Shared commitment

A joint vision of how the conflict could be resolved is developed, probably achieved through some compromises and reframing of the problem.

Step Eight – Negotiation

Agreement on limited objectives emerges after negotiation, and co-operation around these is developed.

Step Nine – Trust

The experience of working together consolidates personal relationships and organisational procedures, based on mutual trust and respect.

Step Ten – Coalitions

More formal arrangements are set up to promote partnership and create mechanisms for dealing with tensions and difficulties that have arisen from conflicting interests and viewpoints.

Step Eleven – Alliances

Alliances are formed around a range of issues which cross the barriers of the original conflict. There is progressive integration and development of informal networks.

Step Twelve – Resolution and Justice

Reconciliation and peaceful co-existence is achieved based on a just and equitable solution to the conflict. Antagonistic identities (us and them) fade away and a new sense of community emerges.

Creating Opportunities for Networking

The task of the community worker is to establish and maintain a safe environment in which people can interact and learn about one another and identify common purpose. This emphasis on developing a social infrastructure, rather than addressing issues directly, is not to argue that the worker is a neutral agent, especially in situations where injustice and discrimination prevail. Rather, they may be simultaneously catalyst and challenger, seeking and suggesting ways to transform oppressive systems, whilst trying to promote and protect the processes of informal education, negotiation and compromise. The conflict itself often provides reason enough for these encounters to take place. The challenge facing the community development worker is to ensure that the inter-connections that arise are constructive and empowering. Equality and inclusion are therefore vital principles on which to base the continuum of interactions from the first tentative conversations, through practical co-operation, to reach genuine consensus and conciliation. Opportunities for secular and spiritual communion often supply the emotional and political space for relationships to take roots and flourish. Joint social activities in welcoming and neutral venues can also play their part.

The community worker's responsibility is to enable, empower and encourage the contending factions in their search for a peaceful resolution which is in accordance with the communities' own values and modes of operating. It is not their role either to mediate or manage the conflict. Inevitably there is a strain between the desire for social cohesion and the need to preserve cultural diversity, but this dialectic tension can be harnessed as a positive force for justice and social transformation. In situations of violent conflict and communal hostility, it takes courage and sensitivity to bring people together, to create conditions and opportunities which people in opposition to one another can use to develop a mutual commitment and eventually even a shared identity as members of one community or nation. The advantage of the social network approach is that it does not impose just one identity. Instead it recognises the multiplicity of identities and roles that structure people's lives and relationships.

Informal networks allow different identities and interests to inter-connect where more formalised structures might attempt to generate a unified homogeneity. Relationships between individuals carry the lifeblood of organisation – trust, loyalty, mutuality and understanding. It is this kaleidoscopic bricollage, the social fabric of communal life, which stores that vital and enduring capacity which we know as community and which the African principle of *ubuntu*, encapsulates: *I am because we are*.

Whilst political reality does indeed distort, and sometimes destroy, civil society and human relationships, community development can go some way to restoring

those social structures which allow us to connect. The 'hidden frontiers' are in our own minds. The community development worker should work to ensure that respect and reciprocity are incorporated into this multi-dimensional web of 'belonging.' It is this which provides a sense of collective security and individual significance. The networking model of community development asserts the values of solidarity and diversity, thus facilitating both differentiation and integration. It requires astute political analysis and compassionate flexibility. It is thus radical, dynamic and humane. Network development does not replace collective organisation – it provides a resilient and vibrant foundation.

References

- Bradbury, Mark, (1994) "The Case of the Yellow Settee: Experiences of Doing Development Work in Post-war Somaliland," in **Community Development Journal**, 29, 2, pp 113-122.
- Burns, Danny; Hambleton, Robin; Hoggett, Paul (1994) **The Politics of Decentralisation: Revitalising Local Democracy**, Macmillan, London.
- Camplisson, Joe & Hall, Michael (1996) **Hidden Frontiers: Addressing deep-rooted Violent Conflict in Northern Ireland and Moldova**, Island Publications, Newtownabbey, Co Antrim, Ireland.
- Gilchrist, Alison, (1994) "Report and Evaluation of the 1994 Bristol Festival Against Racism," Avon County Council Equal Opportunities Unit, Bristol.
- Harbour, Bernard, et al (eds) (1996) **Learning to Disagree: Peace and Economic Development in Northern Ireland**, Unison/Impact. London/Dublin.
- Longland, Tony (1994) "Development in Conflict Situations: The occupied territories," in **Community Development Journal**, 29, 2, pp 132-140.
- Melucci, A (1988) "Social Movements and the democratisation of Everyday Life." in **Nomads of the Present**, J Keane & P Meir (eds), Hutchinson, London.
- Norman, Alex J (1993) "Building Multi-Ethnic Coalitions with Public Sector Organisations: An Expanded Dialogue Model," Ch 3 in **Multi-ethnic Coalition Building in Los Angeles**, Eui-Young Yu and Edward T Chang (eds), Regina Books, Los Angeles.
- Sachane, Jerome (1997) "ACCORD: A Model for Peace Construction," Paper given at the IACD Conference, Pretoria, South Africa, May, unpublished.
- Tarrow S, (1994) **Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Taylor, Vivienne (1997) "The Trajectory of National Liberation and Social Movements: The South Africa Experience," in **Community Development Journal**, 32, 3, pp 252-265.