

Patricia Daniel at the All Wales Peace Festival

At the All Wales Peace Festival on 22nd September there was an inspiring talk by Professor Nick Wheeler from Aberystwyth, on the concept of trust-building in world politics. I remain firmly sceptical about the trustworthiness of many world leaders. However, I'm able to relate the concept to a concrete example from my experience of the UK Government's confidence-building strategy for Guatemala and Belize. This programme was funded under the Global Conflict Prevention Pool, itself a three-way cooperation between the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development - the so-called 3-D model (diplomacy, defence and development) now popular for working with other countries. I've criticised this model elsewhere, in Mali, arguing that its use by western governments tends to be motivated by the thought of their own economic and political gain rather than being of any real benefit to the developing countries in question. However, due perhaps to particular personalities involved in the Guatemala-Belize strategy, there was observable confidence-building over the two years that I acted as independent evaluator against identified objectives.

The strategy aimed to help resolve the longstanding border dispute. Since 1939, when Belize was declared a separate state, Guatemala has refused to recognize its status, claiming the territory is still part of Guatemala. Thus the Organisation of American States, acting as mediator, coined the terms 'territorial differendum' (for the dispute itself) and 'adjacency zone' (AZ) to designate the disputed border region. The term 'confidence-building measures' (CBMs) was substituted for 'conflict prevention' because the Guatemalans maintained there was no conflict to prevent. It may sound simply like playing with words. In fact, people found the use of the term highly significant - not only in maintaining non-violent relationships at state level but also in influencing the attitudes of other actors from each side of the border.

One of the notable aspects of the programme was that, as it evolved, it included an increasing number of different sectors and levels of Guatemalan and Belizean society: government officials, non-governmental organisations, the media, academia, environmental and human rights groups,

communities on either side of the border and the private sector. Similarly it involved a range of cross-border activities: training workshops, exchange visits, study tours, trade fairs, cultural celebrations, civic action and community mobilisation (clearing the river, HIV awareness), mapping, educational materials – and positive media coverage.

Bi-national committees were also set up to develop and move forward joint plans, especially for the economic and social development of the adjacency zone, far from the capital, marginalized, impoverished and neglected. Through working together, representatives from both sides recognised the importance of this as the root cause of conflict. Illegal incursions into Belize's nature reserves by Guatemalans were driven by the need to forage for food, firewood and also what they might sell to middlemen for export (for example, ornamental ferns) despite the threat of arrest and imprisonment by the Belizean security forces. So, community-based enterprises, facilitating legal cross-border commerce, boosting basic health and education services were all initiatives identified for addressing these problems.

Workshops were held for the various partners, from top to bottom, to share experiences and review progress: here, perhaps for the first time, diplomats heard what civil society had to say about the issue of conflict. In particular, it was clear the strategy had helped to change negative stereotypes and perceptions of 'the other'. Overall there was an increase in bi-national cooperation and a capacity for joint initiatives. This created a more conducive atmosphere - resulting in reduced tensions at the border and more positive attitudes towards a final settlement. Local ownership of the OAS confidence building process also developed.

One innovative initiative, which is ongoing, was the inoffensively named Language Exchange (LX) Project - developed (perhaps surprisingly) by the then Military Attaché to Guatemala when bi-national relationships proved too sensitive to go ahead with original plans for joint military training. Working with other ministries on exchange visits and training, developing goodwill and a high profile, the project was eventually joined by both the police and the military – and joint activities by security forces in the adjacency zone were recognised by all as a key factor in reducing tensions.

The LX project was thus an excellent example of the elements contributing to success in confidence-building: flexibility, creativity, persistence, commitment, allowing enough time for things to develop, as well as language skills, of course.

As regards trade collaboration between the two chambers of commerce under the strategy, I had some reservations, mainly because of the US-imposed Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and its potential effects on poor farmers in the AZ. Doubtless the UK had its own economic agenda too. However, the stakeholders I spoke to emphasised that there were already long-standing, though informal, relationships in trade – as indeed there were close social, ethnic, cultural and linguistic links between families in border communities. As happens in many other parts of the world, the real conflicts - which were played out in the everyday lives of the people - were created by their own leaders.

If Guatemala did decide to use force to take back the disputed territory, the UK government would feel obliged to provide military assistance to its former colony Belize – and that's not a desirable scenario. However, the potential conflict between Guatemala and Belize is low priority in comparison with the ever-escalating crisis in the Middle East. I understand the Oxford Research Group have attempted to apply a confidence-building approach there but have not been able to find 'high enough people on either side who are willing to dialogue.'

Nevertheless, the event planned for October 18th - when hopefully One Million Voices will be heard in parallel gatherings in Jericho, Tel Aviv, London, Washington and Ottawa - suggests that there are many people who do want to work together: OneVoice counts over 25,000 Israelis and more than 25,000 Palestinians calling for 'concrete confidence-building measures to improve the lives of the Israeli and Palestinian people.' As Nick Wheeler pointed out in his talk, the impact of grassroots movements on leaders (and vice versa) shouldn't be overlooked. In other words, we shouldn't just focus on summit diplomacy but on all stakeholders. As was observed in Guatemala-Belize, the more people at different levels became involved in confidence-building, the less easy it was for each leader to maintain an overtly aggressive public stance.

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Dr Patricia Daniel is a Senior Lecturer in Social Development at the University of Wolverhampton

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<http://patriciadaniel.blogspot.com/2007/09/global-politics-and-confidence-building.html>

Links

Patricia Daniel's website: <http://www.patriciadaniel.org.uk>

Confidence Building background

http://www.patriciadaniel.org.uk/CBM_archive/background.htm

Centre for International Development and Training (CIDT): <http://www.wlv.ac.uk/cidt>

One Million Voices: <http://www.onemillionvoices.org/>