



# Breaking the Silence



Rural Enabler Programme  
Building Peace Locally

# Breaking the Silence

In the aftermath of sustained conflict, violence and political instability and the introduction of new cultural groups to the community, silence may be a choice in dealing with the tensions which arise. Over time, this silence can become entrenched and reinforced both physically (for example, walls in urban areas) and socially, with people ending up living within a culture of silence of their own creation.

Building sustainable peace requires the creation of “dynamic and respectful interaction between different, even opposing but ultimately interdependent people - who recognise their interdependence in order to build flourishing lives and communities together”<sup>1</sup>.

To create this interaction, it is necessary to break the silence that has developed as a result of years of lack of meaningful communication with others from different backgrounds. Thus breaking the silence must be one of the first critical steps in peace building work.

## Learning from the Rural Enabler Programme

Breaking the silence is slow and sensitive and the Rural Enabler Programme used a three stage process.

- **Contact** - requires opportunities to be created for dialogue with all the groups involved in order to clearly identify the silence as it relates to their particular situations.
- **Engagement** - through joint work/meetings, the next stage is to develop an agreed intervention and to proactively identify, target and support the relevant individuals to become involved and work together.
- **Raising issues to do with the Conflict and Sustaining Engagement** - once trust has been established among the groups involved in the intervention, it is generally possible to raise issues to do with the Conflict. This stage is complex because it is literally breaking the silence about the Conflict, challenging perceptions and opinions and listening to others' accounts of history – a difficult process as there is no one truth about the past. The key to the success of this type of involvement is sustaining and supporting this engagement in the longer term.

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1 Jean Paul Lederach (2007) From Truce to Transformation. Live Issues 5, Belfast.

## Lessons from Practice for Local Policy

The lessons are particularly relevant to organisations involved in supporting activities designed to break the silence at local level. The silence in rural areas can be characterised in a number of different ways including:

- **A polite silence** where pleasantries are observed but where there is limited further engagement and no communication/conversation about the impact and legacy of the Conflict.
- **Avoidance** where there is little or no contact between groups/communities from different backgrounds and cultures. This occurs most frequently in single identity communities and groups where there is little opportunity for contact with people from different backgrounds. However it can also occur in majority communities where the minority is so small that it can be ignored leading to minimal or, in some cases, no contact.
- **A tacit culture of silence** which can be characterised by communities/groups only advertising/promoting their events and activities in places that are known to them thereby excluding others from participation. This tacit culture, which is the result of accepted historical practice, can be practiced/observed by both majority and minority communities and is often presented in terms of *'it has always been done this way'*. The historical nature of this tacit culture of silence can make it difficult to name, acknowledge and to change.

These different types of silence (which can occur singly or in combination) need to be challenged in order to increase communities' awareness of the need to be more open, transparent and ultimately willing to take risks. The further south of the border one travels, the stronger the view is that there is peace. The reality is, however, very different with work on breaking the silence only beginning with some groups and in some areas. Some particular institutions (which involve individuals from a range of backgrounds) can find it difficult to deal with the past and to break the silence around it. This is important work that does not always receive the recognition it deserves because the issue is less visible and it is late developing.

A Shared History Project involved the Enabler working with a local history group to raise the awareness that the perceptions and views of historical events of others from different backgrounds was very different to theirs.

**Learning: Often the first step in breaking the silence is raising awareness of the existence of different perspectives on historical events.**



Development of a Bands Forum involved the local Enabler working with a group of bands to help them develop a representative Bands Forum for over 50 bands. The bands involved were very different, consequently the process of building consensus necessary for the Forum was slow. In the longer term, the Forum will break the silence of these particular cultural groups by offering them a collective voice.

**Learning: Breaking the silence can require the creation of a collective.**

### Fears of/Barriers to Engagement

The Enablers have found work on breaking the silence in rural areas to be both slow and challenging because at local level, most people are very aware of what is happening, making them wary about getting involved. For many groups and communities, this is their first experience of this type of peace building work and it is difficult.

In some cases, projects which were initially agreed had to be changed as it became apparent that individuals were anxious about becoming involved for a number of reasons. They feared being targeted or were afraid of reprisals from a variety of sources, in many cases from within the community (particularly where there had been recent incidents/outbreaks of violence). The legacy of fear of paramilitary organisations where people were punished or threatened for speaking out remains strong in some locations as does a fear of being seen to support the police.

It is important that there is recognition that it takes courage for communities/groups to get involved in breaking the silence and that measures are put in place to ensure individuals/groups are not left open to significant criticism or threat as a result of their participation. In other situations, the Enablers found that local groups did not know how to include individuals from backgrounds other than their own. In these cases, the Enablers supported and facilitated these groups to identify how other groups might be involved.

### Encouraging and Supporting Engagement

A lot of preparatory and capacity building work may be needed to build relationships and trust prior to any work being done. This often means many meetings to keep everyone involved in what is being proposed to ensure that people feel they have ownership and everyone is working at a pace with which they are comfortable. The application and use of a community development approach is useful as it provides groups with opportunities to reflect and promotes dialogue and relationship building.

Arts, sports and cultural activities, as well as formal training, all offer non-threatening approaches around which people can engage, get to know one other and build trust. These types of projects initiate contact and

Challenging racism in a small local authority housing estate arose from the high incidence of racist abuse and attacks within this particular estate. The project used the creative arts to host a series of workings which looked at the importance of respect and tolerance while also celebrating the diversity of people living within the community.

**Learning: Maintaining the confidentiality of the victims of this racist abuse was critical to ensuring that they were able to report what had happened to them.**

The REP worked with Young Offenders and Young People at Risk in various locations to explore issues of sectarianism and racism. This work complemented other training being provided by the PSNI. The workshops provided the young people with a safe place to explore and discuss the impact of the conflict and violence on their lives.

**Learning: Work on breaking the silence can complement other work.**

provide a good start but need to be followed up with workshop sessions where difficult conversations can be facilitated. Some of the most successful breaking the silence work with young people has been undertaken using a combination of physical activities and arts and crafts as the media to collectively explore perceptions, differences and ultimately the silence. Cross border co-operation can also be a catalyst for an initial breaking of the silence, given that for some communities, it is easier to broach the subject of the past and the legacy of the Conflict with people who are not known to them and with whom they do not have ongoing daily contact. Following this, work needs to take place closer to home to support the development of relationships with real peace building work continuing with the neighbour over the road.

### The Importance of Local Knowledge and Leadership

Leaders and key individuals in the community and/or local organisations can provide valuable intelligence and guidance. They can be particularly important in determining the stage of readiness of a particular group/community before actively engaging in breaking the silence work. In some cases, however, local leaders can function as gatekeepers who see their role as retaining their localised power base. Where local leaders function as gatekeepers, organisations seeking to develop interventions and work within these locations need to carefully consider the potential consequences of their actions particularly in terms of legitimising current power relationships.

Creating a Safe Shared Space for Rural Young People - this event involved young people getting involved in a range of activities designed to challenge their beliefs, perceptions and attitudes. It also provided the young people attending with an opportunity to voice their concerns and aspirations to decision makers.

**Learning: Breaking the silence involves getting people from different backgrounds together as well as the facilitation of structured conversations.**

A small group approached their local Enabler to work with them to undertake a media project that would involve interviews with people from different cultures, religions and political persuasions. A spate of violent incidents locally led the group to decide that it was not the right time to attempt this project. Keen not to lose momentum, the group decided to undertake a less potentially contentious arts project instead.

**Learning: Timing and context are critical in terms of work on breaking the silence.**

Within groups, there are those who wish to break the silence while others prefer to remain silent. In some locations, the Enablers have had local groups actively invite them to become involved. While in other situations, individuals have approached the Enablers and asked them to consider becoming involved. Where this is the case, the Enablers have sought support and agreement from all group members to progress with the work - key individuals within a community/group have, in some situations, been able to encourage others/the group to become involved.

Showing leadership and encouraging a breaking of the silence can be very difficult for individuals because of the views of the majority or indeed because of a localised tacit culture of silence that is hard to overcome. Where individuals are in a minority but want to work to break the silence, they need to be supported and equipped with the skills necessary to lead the process. It can take time for individual leaders to develop the courage necessary to take risks in relation to breaking the silence. Timing can also be an important element in the success of this type of work and knowing when groups are ready or not.

### Specialist and other Supports

There is no 'one size fits all' approach to the process of breaking the silence. When groups and communities get to talking about the Conflict, it is useful for them to be able to get support from facilitators trained in this type of sensitive work. It is also useful to have the support of other agencies and groups in this work (local councils, peace partnerships, good relations and community services, to name but some) although it must be remembered that most of the practical work undertaken in relation to breaking the silence happens out of office hours.

### Trust and Engagement

It can be difficult to facilitate individuals and groups to see and acknowledge the perspectives of others. A certain level of trust is required to engage in activities specifically designed to break the silence and, in many instances, this takes a lengthy process of relationship building.

# Lessons from Practice for National and Regional Policy

## Key lessons

- 1** National and regional policy needs to recognise that:
- Within rural areas, there exists a polite and particular silence related to the Conflict.
  - People living in rural areas affected by the Conflict can be very reluctant to engage and fearful of revisiting and re-opening old wounds.

These silences and fears are very real and need to be acknowledged and addressed in a co-ordinated way if progress is to continue to be made towards a peaceful society with people overcoming their fears and engaging in peace building.

- 2** Work in relation to breaking the silence requires strong leadership at regional and national level. There is a need for a clear vision for the future and a road map to help others think about how they may cope in the future. The danger is that those in decision making roles can become removed from the peace building processes.

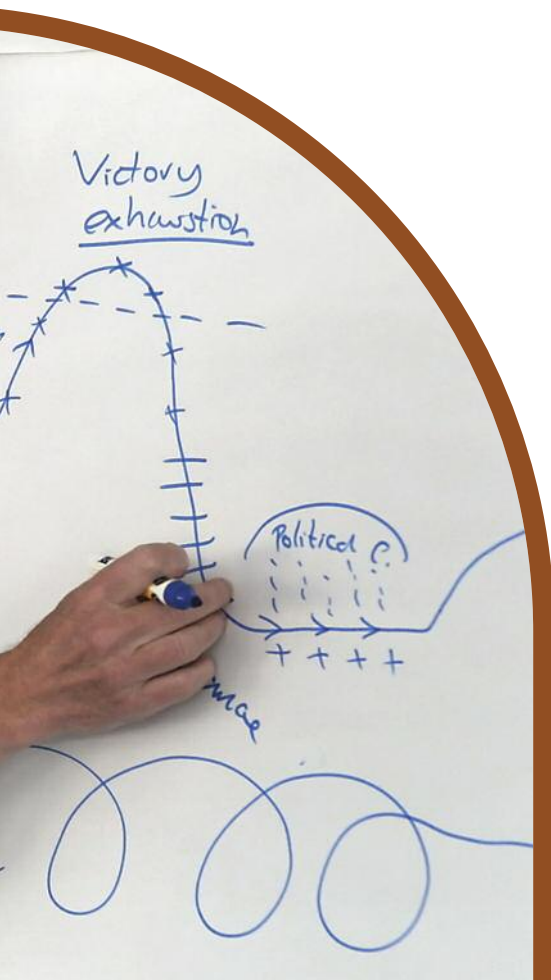
- 3** All peace building work in rural communities should adopt the approach of the Rural Enabler Programme outlined in the Introduction paper.

- 4** Regional and national policy makers and influencers need to recognise the key role organisations and institutions working at a local level can play in supporting work in relation to breaking the silence. Their support, or lack of support, for a particular initiative can often be critical in terms of getting it off the ground. The churches of various denominations have been very instrumental in acknowledging the legacy of the Conflict and the need to reach out to others. It is also important to recognise that within a group, there may be individuals who are very keen to get involved in this type of work but are constrained by the majority opinion/tacit culture of the group.



**5** Challenging the culture of silence within and between rural communities may also necessitate addressing the influence of proscribed organisations which historically held power and, in some areas, continue to retain power and influence. These organisations left unchecked have the potential to prevent communities and individuals from engagement in activities that might break the silence and challenge the current status quo. Efforts therefore need to continue to challenge the practices of these organisations at all levels. This may include work with members of the proscribed organisations as well as others in the community.

**6** In the past, investment has been provided for projects and programmes that have reinforced divisions and the silence by allowing the attitudes and perceptions of individuals and groups to go unchallenged. Poor practice in this area needs to be challenged, good practice highlighted and groups and communities actively supported to engage in the hard work required to break the silence and build a lasting peace.



# Lessons for Practical Interventions with Rural Communities

- Often the first step in breaking the silence is raising awareness of the existence of different perspectives on historical events
- It is important that there is recognition that it takes courage for communities/groups to get involved in breaking the silence and that measures be put in place to ensure individuals/groups are not left open to significant criticism or threat as a result of their participation
- Breaking the silence can require the creation of a collective
- Maintaining the confidentiality of the victims of racist abuse is critical to ensuring that they are able to report what had happened to them
- Work on breaking the silence can complement other work
- Breaking the silence involves getting people from difference backgrounds together as well as the facilitation of structured conversations
- Timing and context are critical in terms of work on breaking the silence
- Arts, sport and cultural activities, as well as formal training, all offer non threatening approaches around which people can engage, get to know one another and build trust
- A certain level of trust is required to engage in activities specifically designed to break the silence and, in many instances, this takes a lengthy process of relationship building
- Showing leadership and encouraging a breaking of the silence can be very difficult for individuals because of the views of the majority or indeed because of a localised tacit culture of silence that is hard to overcome



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