



Leaders and Leadership



Rural Enabler Programme
Building Peace Locally

Leaders and Leadership

Leadership is not an innate quality but leaders exhibit a number of common characteristics including strong analytical skills and a clear vision as well as an openness to new experiences. It is this kind of leadership which can be very helpful where group decision making processes are significant.

Lederach in his 1997 work¹ on building peace identified the importance of a) grass roots/local leadership, b) middle range leadership and c) top/senior level leadership in building and leading peace building efforts. In many rural areas, local, grass roots, community leaders appreciate their role – they have the ability to translate what's happening at regional level to their local community setting. The REP has encouraged and supported the emergence of good community leadership by motivating and encouraging community leaders through practical support and, in some instances, mentoring. As a result, these leaders are able to demonstrate adherence to the ideals of the project through hard graft.

Learning from the Rural Enabler Programme

The Rural Enablers have been working with communities, institutions and agencies across rural areas in Northern Ireland and the six southern border counties to enable and support groups who see a real value in creating and leading the way to a peaceful and stable society.

The Enablers used a three stage process as follows:

- **Contact** – usually contact within the REP is initiated by a local group/community representative as a result of an internal group discussion led by one or two respected individuals on the need to engage with other groups. At this stage, the Enabler will work with the group to explore their current situation and where the vision for their future lies.

1 Lederach, J. P; 1997; Building Sustainable Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies

- **Engagement** – once an Enabler has worked with the group to identify what they want to achieve, the next step is to agree the approach. An important element of this process involves the group and its leadership identifying, targeting and engaging all those who need to be involved. It also usually involves the initiation, development and implementation of an activity or series of activities which will begin the change process. This is crucial to confidence building. The Enabler has an important role in brokering trust with those who are prepared to be involved in supporting and building the capacity of the local leadership. This ensures that all parties can work to their strengths and secure a real buy in to the process, ultimately resulting in the development of enhanced relationships and facilitating change.
- **Sustaining the Engagement** – one successful action or activity should lead to another perhaps more ambitious activity, further enhancing confidence and levels of trust. The development of trust and including a wider community membership requires the implementation of a structured programme of work as well as ongoing communication. The role of the Enabler in this context is to continue to support local leaders facilitating and encouraging this work.

The Rural Enablers have developed a bank of experience and competencies from which they have drawn a range of learning. Given the sensitivities of this ongoing work, no specific individuals or projects have been identified but it is the projects and individuals working with them, supported through the REP which provides the evidence for this paper. As with other practice to policy work in this Programme, the learning has been drawn at local as well as cross border level.

The Rural Enabler Programme is an external intervention working in local communities. There is great value in external agencies coming into rural areas in that they have the capacity to bring in new ideas and 'freshen things up'. In some cases, however, external players are not welcome. The Rural Enabler Programme has developed training for leadership programmes in a number of areas. In Co Down, members of a local institution took part in an Open College Network (OCN) accredited course in community development – Dialogue for Learning – a very practically based course which involved discussions and workshops for young leaders. Participation in this course enabled and encouraged the participants to become more outward looking.

Learning: Individual leaders need training and support interventions to assist them to enhance their leadership and peace building skills.

In one example in Northern Ireland, when community leaders explored the concept of leadership, they were able to cite a number of factors which they felt were important in the local context. These included:

- their strong attachment to the community and a willingness to be steadfast in some ways but willing to go with the best solution in others
- their knowledge of how their communities work and particularly the importance of good communication and interpersonal skills
- their 'thick skin' and commitment to long playing to get their goal
- their recognition of the importance of succession planning, often nurturing and developing new leaders through a systematic process of delegation and support

Learning: Support to leaders at local community level needs to be practical and often on a one to one basis. It is important that there are support networks and opportunities for people to see what's happening in other places and for local leaders to understand and appreciate their qualities as peace building leaders.

Lessons from Practice for Local Policy

Key roles of Local Leaders

Local leaders, including community leaders, elected representatives, faith and church leaders as well as individuals working at a local level in statutory agencies are critical in peace building work because they are generally very aware of what is happening locally and have influence, either formally or informally. They often have the attributes to develop and sustain activities in rural areas where mobilising people can often be very dependent on personal relationships. Leaders can be both the reason and the route for change. They can, however, be a blockage to change (a practice often referred to as 'gatekeeping').

Local community leaders in particular, often have an important bridge building role within their community, between local communities and, in many cases, with elected members and statutory agencies. They can also, by example, lead and show the way to supporting the development of greater inclusion, respect and tolerance.

The most effective leaders do not avoid/pretend conflict is not happening - they engage for the purpose of deepening their understanding of the Conflict and ultimately supporting the resolution of the legacy of this. They press for change and are able to recognise that often the strongest opposers of change may be the emerging future leaders.

Not all groups have a single dedicated leader. In some groups, individuals take on different elements of leadership - one may ensure the group's cohesiveness while another may drive activities and a third may build relationships with other groups and organisations. This sharing of the leadership function between individuals is useful because it maximises the contribution, breadth and depth of skills available to the group.

The Characteristics of Effective Local Leaders

The most effective local leaders are those who are able to lead while, at the same time, listen and observe. They are independent thinking individuals who have vision and can work with others to support the development of a shared vision. They are guided by values of equality and inclusivity. In many cases, they need to be able to make difficult decisions, sacrificing their popularity and their ego in the conviction that the mission of the organisation they are leading is more important than their individual status.

Leadership within institutions presents a real challenge with churches finding it difficult to reach out across religious boundaries. Through the 'Blessed are the Peacemakers' events, the Rural Enabler Programme has facilitated the coming together of faith and church leaders to explore common and often practical issues which faith communities have faced and continue to face in the context of the Conflict and its legacy on both sides of the border. The response from those involved has been very positive, the value of this work being that there is greater interfaith understanding among local leaders. The challenge in moving forward is to see how the faith leadership can work with their local congregations to encourage greater cross community understanding.

Learning: The bringing together of the leaders at institutional level within rural communities, north and south of the Border, often requires external initiation and support to raise awareness of the key role which these institutions have in relation to building peace.



Challenges facing Local Leaders in Peace Building

Individuals may be alienated by taking a leadership role. Some leaders find the prospect of participating in peace building work very challenging and can shy away from it because of these fears. In some instances, local leaders can find themselves isolated and overwhelmed by the challenges posed by peacebuilding which ultimately leads them to withdraw from the process.

There may be a low capacity within a community which does not have a tradition of community development and self help. The experience in many such places has been that the burden of responsibility for the so-called 'hard issues'² to do with peace building are put upon those who are vulnerable and perhaps least able to take on such challenges. There is a need for local players to be aware of these issues and, where possible, share this responsibility.

Individual local leaders can also be very wary of engaging with particular groups or institutions (former paramilitaries in particular and people from other political cultural backgrounds or from a particular institution such as the GAA or Orange Order). This needs to be recognised and acknowledged by all those involved including the funders. Building relationships with these types of groups can also be difficult and, in some cases, undermined by local/party politics.

The resources and time required to be an effective leader can be daunting and leaders can often find their energies absorbed and dissipated by more operational and immediate issues (for example, insurance and fundraising).

Succession Leadership and Growing Leaders

One of the challenges for leaders at all levels is the question of succession. The most effective leaders generally seek to identify and mentor at least one potential successor. This is something more leaders, at all levels, should be encouraged and resourced to do by funders and by others. Individuals who are, or could be, leaders need support to recognise and develop their capacity through applied leadership training and mentoring at local level.

Leaders working with young people will recognise the importance of building capacity with their own young people before embarking on a cross community and across the border basis. In a cross border project among youth groups in Counties Armagh, Fermanagh and Leitrim, leaders took the initial step of preparing their young people for the encounter with the two other groups, as well as arranging the training sessions in their own clubs. The active participation of the leaders aided the project through building their own capacities for understanding and doing cross border work so that they could explain it to those in the community who had concerns. This process also involved the engagement of others including Good Relations Officers as well as others from statutory organisations. This was important preparatory work which leaders need particularly in communities where there is an ingrained suspicion of 'the other', and where leaders run the risk of alienating their own local communities. Leaders valued the importance of undertaking a risk assessment exercise to ensure that they had a full understanding of what they were taking on and how they needed to prepare for this.

Learning: Local communities have great capacity for stretching their leadership capacities. This needs to be done in ways which suit individuals and address their needs at the local level. Also leaders need to have an inbuilt 'risk assessment' mechanism to check on an ongoing basis what their communities can and will bear in terms of peace building work.

2 Examples of these 'hard issues' within the RE peace building programme include where there are so called 'gatekeepers' in local communities who have the capacity to prevent intercommunity work; where there is a prevailing silence about the Conflict and its legacy; where there is potential for communities to mix but they live in parallel to each other.

Lessons from Practice for National and Regional Policy

Lederach³ identified the importance of three levels of leadership:

- Local community grassroots leaders which, in the context of Northern Ireland and the six southern border counties, might include local community group/organisation leaders, individuals involved in community development, local elected representatives, local clergy, etc
- Middle range leaders which could include more regionally focused cultural/religious leaders, leaders of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as academics etc
- Top/senior level leaders which would include political/religious/cultural leaders with high visibility in building peace and leading peace building efforts

1 **The experience of the Rural Enabler Programme has been that connections between these different levels of leadership are not currently well developed and resources and funding need to be targeted at the following.**

- Building the capacity (through participation in focused leadership and peacebuilding training and mentoring programmes) of local leaders in general
- Connecting local leaders involved in peace building work
- Connecting local leaders involved in peace building work to middle and to senior level leaders working in this area

2 **There is a need to continue to provide and develop dedicated peace building leadership support for leaders operating at local level in particular. This includes training and mentoring pitched at 'where people are at' and what is useful to them in their communities. A number of programmes already developed and evaluated could be adapted and tailored to local need and used for this purpose.**

The REP has developed and adapted a number of models of practice around support for leadership. Of particular note is their work with the church leaders which began in some parts of Northern Ireland in the early days of the Rural Enabler Programme and which was subsequently adapted for other areas, often across the border where there is a prevalence of minority faith communities.

3 **The prevailing polite silence in many rural locations north and south of the border can lead people to believe that the Conflict and its legacy are no longer issues. There is a need to continue to provide support for local groups and their leaders to break this silence and to raise important issues hidden behind the politeness.**

Leadership in peace building is everyone's responsibility not just the responsibility of the communities/groups most affected by the Conflict and its legacy. Statutory agencies and elected representatives also hold clear responsibilities with a real need for all sectors to collaborate in leadership for peace building.

4 **The local and national/regional media has a key role in terms of its reporting of good and bad news stories. Leaders at all levels need to encourage and support responsible journalism and highlight and find ways of challenging irresponsible journalism.**

5 **There are lots of unsung community leaders/heroes out there – individuals who quietly go about peace building, who enable, who support and who encourage positive change. Very often these individuals do not get recognition for what they do. Ways need to be found to celebrate and learn from these individuals at a regional and national level.**

³ Lederach, J. P.; 1997; Building Sustainable Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies

6 All peace building work in rural communities should adopt the approach of the REP, outlined in the Introduction paper.



When communities enjoy success in their peace building efforts, it can have the effect of encouraging others to become involved. An example of this has been provided in Co Tyrone, where a number of organisations wanted to engage more young people. Leaders in the local Youth Forum and a creative arts centre recruited and mobilised a group of young people to do a street clean, combined with an interfaith gathering of gratitude, alongside dialogue sessions on issues prevalent in their community. Materials for this clean up were provided by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the PSNI which secured football facilities to provide a fun activity for the young people in recognition of contribution. At the core of this project was the idea of challenging young people to see how working together could support peace building and how their personal commitment to challenging sectarian/racist behaviour could create so much positive change. The project was based on the premise that the young people have the potential to be their community's future leaders and this project provided the impetus to secure their involvement.

Learning: Simple acts of goodness which are relevant to local communities are a good way of encouraging young people in particular to work together. This sort of practice combined with fun activities can provide opportunity to enable young people to see how relevant peace building issues are to them. Issues such as addressing sectarianism and racism and their role in stamping it out are key building blocks for leadership.

Lessons for Practical Interventions with Rural Communities

- Individual leaders need training and support interventions to assist them enhance their leadership and peace building skills.
- Simple acts of goodness which are relevant to local communities are a good way of encouraging young people to work together. This sort of practice combined with fun activities can provide the opportunity to enable young people to see how relevant peace building issues are to them. Issues such as addressing sectarianism and racism and their role in stamping it out are key building blocks for leadership.
- Ways need to be found to celebrate and learn from the unsung community leaders/heroes at a regional and national level.
- Local communities have great capacity for stretching their leadership skills. This needs to be done in ways which suit individuals and address their needs at the local level. Also leaders need to have an inbuilt 'risk assessment' mechanism to check on an ongoing basis what their communities can, and will, bear in terms of peace building work.
- Bringing together leaders at institutional level within rural communities north and south of the Border often requires external initiation and support to raise awareness of the key role which these institutions have in relation to building peace.



028 8676 6670

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This Practice to
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been developed by
**Kathy Walsh and
Ann McGeeney**