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**Supporting Local Actors in Times of Conflict:
The Civil Peace Service and Its Various Actors**

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Abstract

In the last years, the number of articles that have been calling for a stronger influence of local actors in conflict transformation and peacebuilding has been steadily increasing. At the practical level of peace-work, we can already find some examples where the local actors play an important role in the peace processes. This cooperative work can be found for example in the German Civil Peace Service (CPS) that is working in (post-) conflict countries with the aim of involving and working together with local actors in local peace processes. This article reflects on this cooperation and looks into the following questions: How can partnership in peacebuilding look like? What role do power-asymmetries play in the work of the CPS? And what do people working in the area of CPS need and what do they do? To answer these questions, the article uses the unique method of storytelling in order to combine voices from CPS-actors as well as researchers in order to discuss different perspectives and answers to this question. The article will introduce the CPS, its history, and forms of cooperation, will speak about chances and limitations for both local actors as well as German peace workers during the cooperation but also in their training and accompaniment and will close with recommendations for peace work that aims to cooperate with local actors.

Keywords: Peacebuilding, storytelling, local, civil peace, conflict transformation

Introduction

Social sciences among other disciplines and the people working in the area of peacebuilding call for a stronger influence of actors from the global south and their local knowledge in conflict transformation (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013) and there are calls for an “everyday peace” (Mac Ginty 2014, p. 551). Still, actors from the global north continue to play an important role in the peace processes (Paffenholz 2015). By looking into the various cooperatives and partnerships between the actors involved in peacebuilding, it becomes important to analyze power structures, the relationship between local peacebuilders and external supporters as well as the logic behind changes within peacebuilding research (Chandler 2015; Ruppel 2021). Still, there are no clear

answers to the first question of how partnership in peacebuilding could look like and the second question about the role of power. Therefore, this article brings together researchers and practitioners working on conflict and global-local interactions to show and discuss different perspectives and answers to this question. With the help of these various perspectives, this article aims to answer the third question on what actors working in the area of CPS need to carry out their work. The article focuses on the German Civil Peace Service (CPS), that is acting worldwide in (post-)conflict countries with the aim of working together with local actors in local peace processes and promoting a “local people’s peace” (Paffenholz 2011, p. 11). The CPS is carried out by nine German organizations, each with slightly different approaches, but they all work together with local partner organizations (POs) and seconded personnel from Germany.¹

This article provides insights and reflection on research on the CPS, especially its history and relevance, the topic of staff care and interactions of actors, and combines them with reflections from practitioners. Compared to traditional peacebuilding interventions which are mostly designed and implemented with a rather top-down approach, the CPS, with its close day to day interaction and joint planning and implementation of international CPS-workers and local partners, can be seen as an innovative way of how partnership in peacebuilding can look like. Therefore, examining case studies of the CPS’ work can contribute to answer the questions raised. The article itself tells five different stories of the CPS that complete each other and show a mosaic of approaches to the CPS. Using knowledge from field research and introspections from people working with and for the CPS this article uses the method of storytelling – a method that is often used within the CPS and is well known as a peacebuilding method (Bush et al. 2011). The storytellers themselves offer different perspectives from within and outside Germany, from practitioners and scholars, and cover the different questions that are important for them in their own work. In the case of this article, the method of storytelling aims to give insights into the CPS and to give the authors (who wrote the individual stories and selected references) the chance for elaborations on their understanding and experience with a certain focus on their research and work. The method helps to reflect the authentic experience of the individual authors and the different sections are told like a traditional story to utilize the narrative approach as a good way to explain complex settings (Polletta et al. 2011). Therefore, the method of storytelling can help to give answers to research questions and the stories can play an “active role in the development and evaluation of hypotheses” (Geleman and Basbøll 2014, p. 548) in social science.

The stories all highlight different vital aspects of conflict transformation work. Elaborating on these different aspects help to explore the field of the CPS

¹ For a more detailed explanation of the CPS see Ruppel 2023.

but doesn't aim to necessarily compare the topics. The article starts with a story about peacework in Germany and describes some of the grassroots of the CPS and will reflect on what the CPS is still missing in order to have a true partnership. To look into the cooperatives of the CPS, the article will then examine different levels of cooperation between CPS-actors. For this part, examples outside of Germany have been chosen, as this is where the CPS is implemented. The storytellers work in Liberia and Sierra Leone. These two countries have been chosen, as a variety of CPS-projects is implemented there as well as they have a long history in peace cooperation. The last two stories will focus on the training and preparation of peaceworkers. At the end, the article will reflect on the inputs and answers to the research questions of the various stories and combines them in recommendations for the CPS and peace work in general.

1. "Peace Service for my country and for your country"²

I intend to tell you the story of peace service in East and West Germany. I will stress how it influenced the idea of the CPS and how my biography is connected with it. I will also reflect (in my personal view) on what the CPS is still missing in order to become a true peace service in partnerships.

The idea of peace services started 100 years ago. In 2020, we celebrated 100 years of the "workcamp" idea, which started as a reconciliation project between the French and German people after World War I (Berndt 2008). After WWII, the Action Reconciliation Service for Peace³ was founded through a declaration of the recognition of guilt for the Nazi crimes by members of the synod of the Protestant Church in Germany in 1958. The organization started to send young voluntary Germans to countries in Eastern Europe and North America, as well as Israel, which have suffered under German Fascism. This service was a gesture to ask for reconciliation. Later on, after the construction of the Wall between East and West Germany, Action Reconciliation Service had to split up into two branches. The West branch continued with long-term voluntary service; the east branch had to reduce their activity to "workcamps" that typically lasted three weeks.

At the same time organizations like the World Peace Service and Eirene – International Peace Service were founded to foster partnerships with the Global South, and to send people to work in these countries. Later on, this was done using the legal framework of development service.⁴ In 1961 the West-German "Zivildienst" started – the civil service for conscientious objectors as an alternative to military service. Some organizations organized it as an international voluntary peace service. Some of these organizations were among

² Reflections on the history of Civil Peace Service by Bernd Rieche, CPS expert at AGDF.

³ <https://www.asf-ev.de/de/english/about-us/history/>.

⁴ <https://www.entwicklungsdienst.de/ueber-uns/struktur/geschichte/>

the founding organizations of the AGDF, the Action Committee for Peace, an umbrella organization of peace service.

In East Germany, compulsory military service was also reinstated in the early 60ies. Conscientious objectors refused it, so the unique construct of so-called Building Soldiers was installed. They were soldiers in the army without a weapon. The Building Soldiers community became a melting pot for oppositional thinking.⁵ Friendships that had started there became an important part of the opposition against the socialist regime in East Germany. Yet, because it was still a military service, in the 80ies, a group of young Christians started to campaign for a Social Peace Service as a substitute. This movement was unsuccessful at the time and some of the early activists were prosecuted or even arrested (Bürger 2013).

The Peace Services mentioned above were important for my own path. I was born in 1970 and grew up in East Germany. I was 16 when I first met with young people from abroad for a couple of weeks during a “workcamp” with Action Reconciliation (East). One year later I participated in a “workcamp” where we cleaned up foot paths in a former concentration camp and national memorial. Later that year, I got the chance to take part in the only peace demonstration ever in East Germany at which the emblem “Swords into Ploughshares” was shown officially. This was at the “Olof Palme peace march”, the only peace action in East Germany organized jointly by Action Reconciliation, oppositional church groups and the FDJ – the communist youth organization (Bürger 2013).

In East Germany, the protestant church was generally in opposition to the East German state and provided shelter for oppositional groups, including peace or environmental circles (Rieche and Weingardt 2008). It was the only space where a youngster like me could discuss freely, for instance, becoming a Building Soldier or even totally objecting to military service and facing getting arrested. Initially, I intended to do normal military service as a precondition to be able to attend university. Yet, in the end I became a Building Soldier - where I luckily became part of the peaceful dissolution of the army in 1989/1990.

In retrospect, I understood that the support and the substantial funding of the protestant church of East Germany by the church of West Germany without any preconditions was a very helpful and needed service. This changed after the reunification, when financial support was tied to implementing the West German state-church system.⁶

⁵ <http://www.gesellschaft-zeitgeschichte.de/geschichte/bausoldaten-in-der-ddr/>

⁶ <https://www.bundesstiftung-aufarbeitung.de/de/recherche/dossiers/198990-friedliche-revolution-und-deutsche-einheit/deutsche-einheit-und-kirchen>

These stories of peace service in East and West Germany illustrate one of the roots of the CPS among others.⁷ In the late 90ies, I was active in the Friedenskreis Halle, a peace group that we founded in 1990. Several colleagues and I started a project in Bosnia. At the time we started it without a local partner organization (PO) because after the war in Bosnia, there was no independent partner that had not been involved in one or the other war parties. In the beginning, we started supporting Bosnian refugee families living abroad. After the end of the war in 1996, we started with volunteers to build up a youth centre in the small town of Jajce. Some years later, in 2000, this became one of the first CPS-projects. This change gave us the possibility to fund long-term qualified volunteers and to employ locals in the project. The CPS project ended after three years, but still to this day, there is an ongoing exchange of young volunteers and the project developed into a true partnership.

Being part of this project and also later on from the CPS colleagues I learned how important partnership is. And still today with any new project, it is always an important question what kind of local partner you can find, and you may collaborate with. Especially in post war times, when structures, institutions and organizations have to be developed again. Always ask yourself: Is your partner only there because you are there?

1.1 What can the CPS learn from this story?

The CPS has a long and successful history. The story clearly shows how political circumstances as well as individual organizations have shaped the CPS over time as well. Time has shown how important partnership and support is, but we know how easily partnership can drift into dependence. We all need partners who are able to support us with another perspective from the outside which also often means from abroad. We strongly need it in Germany too, as we have conflicts for example with neo-Nazis or about the topic of migration and they also turn into open violence. Due to its mandate and funding by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the German CPS can only send people abroad and not host peace experts from abroad in projects in Germany. Just, know there is a new opportunity to also invite people, their work still has to be aimed at the countries in the south, an area of the CPS that needs to be explored further. Another vision of extending the partnerships is, that the German CPS will become a part of a worldwide peace service, of a network of organizations that send people abroad to support peace work between partners. From Germany, we could for example invite experts from Burundi and Myanmar and at the same time send qualified volunteers into these countries. At the same time a space where all sides can exchange experiences and learn from each other will be important. To summarize the story and the lessons learned it can be said that peace work is especially helpful for partnerships at eye level, because it mainly needs people with their experience

⁷ <https://www.entwicklungsdienst.de/ueber-uns/struktur/geschichte/>

and knowledge and it doesn't need much technical supply. But there is still a long way to go.

2. “The civil peace service from the insight: A view from a Liberian partner organization”⁸

Liberia, as a post-conflict country has a variety of local and international actors that are working on the topic of peace. One of them is the Kofi Annan Institute for Conflict Transformation (KAICT), which is a partner of the CPS. It is a semi-autonomous unit of the University of Liberia, where I am working. The Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Cape Palmas, Liberia, informed me about the CPS and encouraged me to apply on behalf of KAICT for a CPS-worker to support what he referred to as “a great work of nation-building”. This application was reviewed by the Country-Coordinator of CPS. We began our cooperation with the CPS in 2008. Our application was successful, and the first CPS-worker joined in 2010. From this time on, a long-drawn cooperation developed, with three CPS-workers having been seconded to KAICT. The first CPS-worker was seconded to KAICT for three years and was reappointed but had to be evacuated in the first year of the second term due to the Ebola Virus Disease outbreak in Liberia (Perry and Sayndee 2016). The second CPS-worker was seconded in 2016 and stayed six years. The third CPS-worker started with us in early 2022 for an initial three-year term. These changes of CPS-workers have brought new insights into the Institute including skills, working styles, and organizational capacity building.

The cooperation with the CPS has enabled us to have some of the basic resources. It needs to carry out outreach programs to communities and to do high level research in order to support and enhance teaching and learning at the Master classes. Besides the work at the university, we at KAICT focus on the work with local people. Typically, institutions, communities or groups make a request for training and capacity building. When we at KAICT get such requests, it will be evaluated by our team. However, in most instances, logistical support to implement the said training is a challenge, as we only have limited resource capacity. This is where the support of the CPS comes in handy. CPS-workers are usually equipped with vehicles, stationery and other material that are necessary to make such trainings possible. We team up to carry on the needed intervention as requested. In other instances, we at KAICT may identify some capacity building needs in a community or sector of the society and will develop an intervention accordingly together with the CPS. Additionally, some of the CPS POs also selected members of their working groups to participate in these sessions and thereby multiplying the benefit of the trainings. These

⁸ Reflections from T. Debey Sayndee, CPS-partner in Liberia, Kofi Annan Institute for Conflict Transformation, University of Liberia.

trainings provide lessons in integrity, gender, and conflict prevention. The participants go out as peace ambassadors to their respective communities.

Aside from the regular CPS activities, we closely collaborated with other CPS-partners. The CPS-partners in Liberia have constituted themselves into a network for collaborating on actions and activities. The key area of this collaboration started with the joint celebration of International Day of Peace, which is celebrated each year (Fultang and Atitwa 2017) and mainly organized by the KAICT. We celebrate this event by bringing together students from major Universities, civil society, and the public to commemorate the day with programs for promoting peace. There are many success stories from these celebrations. For example, in Palala, Bong County, the celebration re-ignited the community's return to their communal method of settling disputes in which the rival parties settled a long standing dispute with the exchange of Kola nuts and pledge never to attack each other again.

But not only for the communities, but also for us as CPS-partners, this collaborative approach has been quite helpful on various levels. This wide range of actors from all levels and a focus on capacity building go hand in hand with the approaches by other internationally working organizations in post war Liberia (McCandless 2008). From our perspective relationships are built and fostered through partnership, analysis of the driving factors of a given conflict, accessibility to various actors, their level of trust and the possibility of real impact and change through engagement. For example, the collaborative network allowed us, as the CPS network to come together and support the major intervention during the Ebola outbreak. Relying on our support network allowed us to work better when "business-as-usual" is made harder by acute crisis (Eufemia et al. 2020). Together we planned interventions, in order to take awareness to remote areas and we developed messages that were easy to understand by the local people. Based on our past experience, when COVID-19 broke out, the CPS network organized an intervention that was directed at the epicenter of the outbreak in the country. This outreach and awareness campaign consisted of activities for the prevention, awareness, and information on the COVID-19 pandemic where we collaborated to developed appropriate messages. Health experts in the network provided the knowledge, while we at KAICT provided the community engagement approach, while others worked on the communication and media outreach. Together, we worked cooperatively to make the intervention impactful for rural dwellers and slum communities that other organizations did not reach with their awareness work. Through this CPS collaboration, there have been many outcomes that are tangible and few of them to consider include guiding local peace actors on how to best work with communities affected by conflict; helping some of the local institutions and donors to improve their community policies in contexts of violence, crisis, and fragility; working through local stakeholders and communities to identify and unite around collective actions that a community identifies as positive.

2.1 What can the CPS learn from this story?

As the story has shown, the CPS can successfully support the work of CPS PO in the country. This does not only happen with the knowledge or due to exchange but especially due to financial and technical support. As much as this is needed, it opens the question of the power imbalance between the different partners. The CPS still has a giving and a receiving end of the partnership, which is very problematic if it is not reflected upon and just called “partnership on eye level”. The strong point of the CPS is another sort of partnership, namely the one between POs. Together, the CPS-partners work in a wide range of sectors, but also work corporately as a network to support each other and enlarge the scale of the CPS impact on peace in the country. It shows that this network is a very important part of the CPS and is a selling point. These networks are a fundamental part of the CPS and need to be taken into account more strongly by, for example, the country strategies and in the definition of partnership within the CPS.

3. “Fully utilize the potential of the CPS-approach by granting sufficient time and space for local ownership”⁹

Every German organization that carries out the CPS has its own approach when working with its partners. There are two main models: Either having CPS-workers placed at CPS-country offices from which the partners receive trainings, advice, or support for specific campaigns or projects. Or the CPS-workers are embedded in their PO, usually with a three-year contract, with the option for extension if wished by all parties involved. Here, local ownership is supposed to be additionally strengthened as the CPS-worker is part of the staff of the local PO, being supervised by and having to report to the director or line manager of the hosting organization.

Based on the CPS’s fundamental principal of partner orientation (Ziviler Friedensdienst 2014) and out of necessity, this structure leaves a lot of room for flexibility in its specific practical implementation. This is an advantage given the huge variation of contexts in which the CPS operates. Additionally, the specific implementation and the actual amount of partner orientation is determined by the characteristics of the individual PO and the CPS-workers’ personality.

As my experience is working as a CPS-worker with Agiamondo in Sierra Leone from 2015 to 2021, first at the CPS-country-coordination level, later integrated in the youth organization West African Youth Network, my story will focus mainly of latter aspect – the interaction of CPS-workers and the

⁹ Reflections from Christoph Schlimpert time working as a seconded CPS-worker in Sierra Leone.

POs.¹⁰ For this interaction to be fruitful the African proverb “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together” can serve as a personal guidance as it helps to ensure ownership and sustainability in a cooperation setting like the CPS.

This is important because as an international expert working abroad, one can be tempted to do things on your own, as it seems that by doing so, it would be easier to deliver fast results. For the local partners this “shortcut” approach could also seem convenient as it would take less of their time and could deliver quality outputs. Yet, in this way both sides would fail to make use of the full potential of the CPS cooperation model, as it circumscribes mutual learning and sustainability. In the worst case, this could even lead to a decrease in the PO’s capacities if it becomes used to outsourcing certain tasks to the CPS-worker that otherwise would be done by regular staff, leaving a new gap at the end of the CPS-project instead of closing existing ones. Therefore, this section will discuss strengths and weaknesses of the integrated CPS-worker approach and the factors that could help to avoid certain pitfalls.

From setting up project designs, to its monitoring and implementation: As someone trained in the Global North education system one is usually more familiar with the tools and frameworks which were mainly developed in the Global North. As they often demand a certain level of formal education it can be quite demanding and can take more time to understand and apply them for someone who received his or her schooling in a dysfunctional education system and even more for individuals who became peacebuilders by being community activists or traditional leaders, and not by taking courses at formal education institutions. Therefore, to counter this power imbalance, one fundamental basis of good partnership in the sense of the CPS is not to deliver “fast results” but, if necessary, to focus more on the process than on the results to allow the local colleagues to be part and even to be the true owners of the process. Therefore, it is necessary to leave the established paths, which is often top-down and has little connection to local community actors and mostly overlooks their capacities to build their own peace within their societies (Autesserre 2021).

This means sometimes that on the surface it feels like “less is more” by avoiding over-ambitious project designs with unrealistic time frames and looking beyond the focus on “big people” as members of the elite but rather taking the “grassroots” seriously and engaging and strengthening everyday peacemakers within their communities. These local peacemakers can be formal part of a CPS-project as staff or volunteers of CPS-PO or as direct or indirect partners within a defined project, as well as other influential actors or everyday

¹⁰ As my experience is that of the CPS-worker in a specific constellation I can only provide limited insights in the partners perception or the experience of other CPS-workers on the other end of the spectrum of country and organization specific contexts. For a wider range of partner’s perceptions see: Ruppel 2023.

people who interact in multiple ways with each other. Looking deeper it becomes clear that this approach is not even “less” to begin with.

To give an example: The initial project planning process for a CPS project takes place in a planning workshop. In the case of Agiamondo, this workshop usually takes three days and includes the PO with its CPS-worker, the Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (PM&E)-officer from the CPS-coordination office and the CPS-coordinator. The planning phase could be faster if the CPS-worker comes up with the project goals, objectives, indicators, and activities. Since the setting of a planning workshop is often a “home game” for the international expert, the danger is that there will be quick results in the form of well sounding project designs while the partners are standing by and agreeing without really agreeing or fully understanding the process. Due to the inherent power imbalances, the risk is high that ownership is lost or was never established without the international expert even noticing. Additionally, to this power imbalance caused by the formats and language being used, the financial dependency often comes into play. The local partners might play along just out of fear of upsetting their “donor”¹¹ as they are usually intent to reapply for a new CPS-project and the funding it entails. This is highly problematic as research shows that peacebuilding “can only be successful if local actors are actively included and if they are put in the driver’s seat of the peace process” (Ruppel 2020, p. 1). Therefore, questions regarding the role of power in the interactions between CPS-organizations, CPS-workers and local partners remain crucial throughout every step of the cooperation. As the contractual responsibilities are defined rather minimalistic, requiring the PO to use the financial and project monitoring systems of Agiamondo but not “dictating” the content of and the approach to implementing the project, the local partner has actually a real possibility to place himself in the driver’s seat. This is clearly stated in the document that is outlining the principles of the CPS which grant the local partners the authorship for defining the goals and approaches for each CPS-project and locate the development of the CPS-country-strategies mainly within the host countries to ensure the inclusion of the expertise and perspectives of the local partners (ZFD 2014). To utilize the full potential provided by the CPS-framework in practice, a continuous dialogue between the parties is important to ensure that both sides understand their roles. Misunderstanding could easily lead to a falling back on top-down approaches, with the international side of the partnership pointing the way and the local partner merely implementing what they see as being expected from them.

Other problems that could hamper the utilization of the CPS-approach’s potential could occur if for example the director of an organization is not present at the planning workshop or does not show much interest in the CPS-project.

¹¹ CPS always emphasizes not being a donor but a partner. This is often, for good reasons, seen differently by local partners (Ruppel 2020).

Reasons could be time constraints, since dedicating three full working days to a workshop is often difficult for senior leadership, or that the CPS-project is not seen as being important enough, which can especially be the case with bigger organizations. Hierarchical structures, as they are found within many organizations in Sierra Leone, would limit the possible contributions of the staff that is present or could reverse the results from the workshop if the director sees it important to become involved at a later point. This can result in a very frustrating experience for a CPS-worker who would expect to follow the planning document as agreed to in the workshop. If the partner is not much interested in the CPS-project, sometimes CPS-workers see only the options to support the partner with its other projects, trying to get at least some of the planned project implemented, or to sit and wait for the partner, often in vain, resulting in her or him not being very effective for three years. Sometimes CPS-workers in that situation decide to try implementing parts of what is planned on his or her own, therefore delivering some results but without being able to fulfill the criteria of local ownership or partnership.

The real advantage of the CPS approach is that it provides the keys to avoid this trap, which are time, close day to day interaction, and flexibility. This is defined in the CPS principles where it is stated that CPS-workers must live in the country where the CPS-project takes place to enable them to develop close relationships with their local partners (ZFD 2014). The need for flexibility and context orientation is reflected in the CPS's understanding of result orientation (ZFD 2014) and has implications for the related monitoring and reporting systems (ZFD 2014).

Since every CPS-project has its own specific dynamics, which are determined by the context and the constellation of working together, recommendations and lessons learned can often be difficult to generalize. But to ensure local ownership and sustainability, thereby fully utilizing the potential of the CPS-approach, it is crucial to adapt any CPS-project to the realities of the context and the needs and targets of the PO. While planning, monitoring and evaluation tools and systems can play an important role in supporting partners to achieve their goals, it needs to be understood by all parties involved that they are not an end in itself. Also, CPS- organizations and the CPS-workers must be aware that those systems and their foundations' origin from Western education systems, making them less accessible for someone who did not receive a similar training if vocabulary and formats are not adapted to the contexts where they are supposed to be used. PM&E should always be approached as participatory as possible, enabling ownership by the PO. A rather voluminous handbook on outcome mapping (Kuijstermans 2019) is provided by the CPS in the case of Agiamondo, including many useful tools and approaches that offer the opportunity to choose those who seem most suitable for the specific context of the project. Here "less is more" applies again, since it is better to invest more time in fewer tools, and to make sure the staff of the PO is always part of the process, understands why and how monitoring is applied and becomes

capacitated to adapt the PM&E systems to their own needs and implement it in future projects without CPS-support. Therefore, it is necessary to avoid the risk of going for the “fast solution”. The CPS-worker could be tempted to do the monitoring and reporting on his or her own, without trying to “bother” the local partner, for whom this framework might often seem rather alien. This way he or she could deliver nicely formulated reports which might be rather detached from the views of the local partner. Here again, less is usually more: To start with a rather minimalistic monitoring system but ensure that the partner is on board and sees the value of it would usually be the more sustainable approach.

3.1 What can the CPS learn from this story?

While what is described here might sound rather logical and harmonic, many of these insights result from the insight of several years of experience and I also fell regularly into the trap of trying to rush things and had to learn to take myself back and to give room to local colleagues who always remain the true experts of peacebuilding in their communities. Only looking back after several years of working side-by-side in joint project implementation revealed the great impact and transformation on both sides of the equation and as the cooperation progressed it became increasingly possible to see each other’s strengths. For example, while doing a community conflict analysis during my final months, I understood much better which questions to ask and being fully aware that even after living half a decade in the country I would not even come close to getting the answers right. In the end, this complementarity carries the power of CPS approach: as an outsider, one can offer certain (participatory) tools and financial resources and contribute by asking questions. But the answers have to be given and the final calls need to be made by the local partners and this are aspects that need to be considered with high priority in every CPS project.

4. “From the lived reality to the virtual community – a shift in peacebuilding trainings”¹²

On March 16th, 2020 the full-time professional training in peace and conflict work was set to begin in Germany with 16 peace practitioners working all over the globe. Participants were ready to leave their homes and immerse themselves in a 10-week learning experience.

One of them was already on his way to the airport when, on March 13th, the global pandemic obliged the organization to shift the course from a presence event to a virtual training. The format, structure and content needed to be adapted to the needs, conditions, and opportunities of digital learning. The human connection that the 10 weeks living together sought to find was interrupted by unstable internet and faces on the screen. Instead of travelling to an environment close to nature and distancing themselves for 10 weeks from

¹² Reflections by María Requena López, former advisor for Cooperation and Development at the Academy for Conflict Transformation and freelance trainer in the area of peacebuilding.

the social tensions of their daily lives, participants not only remained fully occupied by work, family, and routines, but furthermore needed to obtain the energy to concentrate in the online training, all while dealing with the pandemic. Our initial intention as the organization team to create a calm atmosphere where they could fully concentrate on the process was suddenly and irremediably challenged by the new situation. The contact hypothesis and intergroup contact theory, both pillars of conflict transformation, are challenged in the digital sphere (Laruni et al. 2020).

This is a story of three of the participants of that course, but their stories are only a representation of the many different stories; a window to better understand a process-oriented approach to training, which puts individuals at the center of the experience, takes participants as the main resource for knowledge and understands learning as a complex, multi-layered process (Alvarez et al. 2019).

The story begins with Remy, who recently lost their job, needed to move back to their parents' place and enrolled in the course looking for a career shift. Remy gets infected with COVID-19 and spends a significant amount of time at home, isolated, without much more in their life than the digital platform that offers a door to the course. The uncertainties surrounding their job situation, the pessimism around the pandemic and the emotionally demanding topics that need to be dealt with in a peace training soon begin to take an emotional toll on Remy.

On the other extreme, there is Kaya, surrounded by people at most times of the day: married, 5 kids, 8 cats and a full-time job. Kaya has worked in the area of conflict transformation in her region as long as she can remember and brings an incredible amount of hands-on experience. This is something she can do when she actually has time and energy to focus on the course. Kaya is expected to work, be a wife, act as the primary caretaker of the children, the cats and the house and, in this case, also focus on a demanding online training. She comes from a context where this expectation is imposed on her by cultural gender norms (Harmat 2020). Little else needs to be said to imagine the pace of Kaya's life, which she seemed to always face with a smile in the camera.

For Bruno, unfortunately, having the camera turned on during the life sessions of the training is often impossible. He lives in a region with active armed conflict and is being persecuted due to his many years of peace activism. In recent years, Civil Society Organizations and peace activists globally have experienced an increasing risk of "public defamation and stigmatisation, intimidation and criminalisation, even including threats to personal safety, arrest and murder" (Justen and Rolf 2018, p. 1). That is why Bruno needs to constantly change locations throughout the 10 weeks of training, and his connection is often weak and unstable. His situation also has a strong impact on the group that quickly develops a strong relationship with Bruno and tries to stay updated about his situation. The group cohesion depends on all members

being safe and present, and that is why the constant check-ups on him become an essential part of the journey.

These are only three of the 16 stories in the group, each with their personal challenges outside of the course. If we as facilitators would have taken a traditional approach to learning as the retention of knowledge, with an “emphasis on performance and measurable outcomes” (Shapiro 2015, p. 8), I dare to say that the course would have been a failure. The difficulties participants had to concentrate on the course, the inability to “switch off” other aspects of their lives to free time and energy for the course, and the lack of a common physical space to share the learning process made it extremely difficult to monitor the way in which learning objectives were being met and to evaluate the cognitive learning progress.

COVID-19 and the shift to digital training made us face our own ability to practice what we preach: reacting to crisis, adapting to the needs of the target groups, trusting the process (Lederach 2005). Therefore, the course served much more as a sharing ground for current challenges and a space to explore one’s own needs and boundaries.

Remy used all the time they had on their hands to summarize the learning materials and share it with the rest of the participants. Colleagues like Kaya could truly benefit from these summaries, which allowed her to stay up-to-date and remain connected with the group. She nourished this connection by sharing with all of us pictures of her cats— a tiny, simple gesture, outside of the scope of the course, which had a tremendous impact on the feeling of community of the group and contributed to build relationships among participants (Alvarez et al. 2019). Furthermore, she shared that setting the example for her children, who could see her work as a peacebuilder and contribute to the course on a daily basis, had been one of the most meaningful happenings of the course. From a feminist critical pedagogy perspective, this in and of itself is already a contribution to social transformation (Harmat 2020), which is ultimately the process which participants are learning to initiate and accompany. Bruno felt part of that community and, since he often could not join the live sessions directly, he called one of the other participants individually to connect the voice and audio through their phone. In the end, this allowed him to establish a bilateral connection with everybody, to get to know them in the more intimate space of one-on-one phone calls and to open possibilities for using whatever resources we had at hand for supporting each other. In this unexpected practice, participants developed their ability to empathize with others, adapt to the situation and embrace complexity, all of which Lederach considers essential aspects of preparation for peacebuilding (Lederach 2014).

Participants found those ways of relating to one another and generating their own group dynamic on their own. Although we always take the group process into account and integrate learning from its dynamics as an essential part of all our courses, the sudden shift during the pandemic made us face

enormous uncertainty as for how exactly this would work out in an online context – if at all. The way in which we tried to deal with those open questions was by applying to ourselves the same principles we convey in our courses. On the one hand, we opened the space for disturbances to take priority in the process, as proposed by Ruth Cohn’s model of Theme-Centered Interaction (Cohn and Klein 1993). On the other, we followed Lederach’s principles for peacebuilding, especially by accepting the circumstances that came in our way with a peripheral view and a willingness to deviate from our pre-designed course path (Lederach 2005). What this ultimately meant is that we guided a process which we did not control but could trust.

4.1 What can the CPS learn from this story?

Peacebuilders definitely need certain skills and knowledge related to the field, and the importance of expertise and know-how should not be understated. At the same time, capacity building needs to remain focused on applying the same principles we share for project work to our training activities. Building trust, strengthening relationships, taking participants as the main resource for learning, trusting the way in which the group itself chooses to carry the process and embracing diversity in the forms of learning, sharing and obtaining knowledge are all key in supporting the key players in conflict transformation.

The way we design peacebuilding trainings -perhaps just as much as education in general- needs to be reconsidered: from an input of knowledge to a facilitation of exchange; from a generation of expertise to an incubator for skills development. We need to de-colonize the ways we use words like “learning” or “teaching”, and most importantly we need to conceptualize and conduct trainings with the same attitude we would accompany peacebuilding processes: guided by authenticity, approached with empathy and stimulated by openness to change.

At the Academy, the pandemic has taught us that very significant learnings can be drawn from the most unexpected and uncontrolled circumstances. As long as we remain true to our own principles, trust the process and prepare the framework with care and high quality, the energy, knowledge and attitude that participants already bring with them are the real drivers of the learning journey.

5. "Connecting inner and outer peace work – Supporting conflict workers to support conflict transformation"¹³

Peace workers in the CPS have the task of accompanying peace processes. They are not the 'makers of peace' but focus on supporting local peace actors in different countries of the world to transform conflicts in a

¹³ This contribution deals with questions that are part of Daniela Pastoors research. The story and the characters are fictional, but based on the findings of a dissertation (Pastoors 2021).

sustainable and non-violent way (Ziviler Friedensdienst n.y.; Pastoors 2017; Pastoors 2019). The transformative paradigm of peace and conflict work goes hand in hand with an elicitive attitude and practice, that does not apply techniques, prescribes 'recipes' or provides solutions. Rather, it means to establish a relationship and to design a helpful framework to elicit the already existing wisdom on conflict transformation (Lederach 1995).

Thus, it places specific demands on professionals who want to support processes of change in this way. Due to the complex challenges of their activities and their multi-layered roles, CPS professionals need many competences: special skills, sound knowledge and a distinct attitude (Schüßler and Thiele 2012; Schweitzer 2009; Sell 2006). At the same time, they need to master the demanding art of peace work without losing sight of themselves. Looking at peace work as relationship work reveals that, in addition, peace workers need spaces for reflection, which must necessarily be part of professional peace practice. Not only peace work needs accompaniment, but also peace workers – and different elements of psychosocial staff care can enable this support (Pastoors 2018; Pastoors 2021). Although the importance of staff care and support measures for expatriate staff has been repeatedly referred to in the literature, very few studies focus on this, in particular in peace and conflict work (Behboud 2009; Schwarz 2009). The practice of staff care has only been studied in a few areas of international cooperation, mainly in the humanitarian aid sector and for staff in the field of mental health & psychosocial support (Becker et. al. 2018; Jachens et al. 2018). Therefore, in my research I focused on the question of how psychosocial staff care is provided to professionals in the CPS (Pastoors 2021).

To explore the question what peaceworkers in the CPS need, in the following I tell the fictional story of Kim: a peace worker, who is in a crisis of purpose and who is looking for ways to deal with it.

A peaceworker's story: Climbing out of the hole

"Why am I here?"

Does this work make sense?

Can I really make a meaningful contribution?"

Kim was working as a peace and conflict worker in a civil peace service project. The project was nice and she was truly passionate about the CPS, her partner organization and the joint work on conflict transformation.

But still, she had doubts and huge questions about purpose. She was unsure whether it makes sense that she was there. She questioned her own motivation. She was doubtful about the possibility of change anyway.

"Can we really make a difference here?"

*Can this little project change anything in the deeply rooted conflict?
Is peace work not just a drop in the ocean of violence?"*

She fell into despair about the state of the world.

*She became quieter, less active, less involved.
She participated in daily work, but her mood had impacts: she was less creative,
less open and less confident.*

*She was there, working on the project, in contact with colleagues and project
partners, but it felt to her as if none of this was real. As if efforts for peace and
conflict transformation were not real. As working in partnership was not real.
As if she herself was not real.*

*Kim was stuck and could not get out of the negative circles her thoughts drew.
She was sitting in a deep hole and got stuck in it.*

*One day, a regional CPS-meeting was scheduled.
Kim did not feel much like going, but still she went. She met colleagues and
there was a lot of talk about the projects and the work. She listened but had no
big interest in country strategy papers and project evaluations.*

*For the afternoon, an "intervision" session was scheduled. She never had any
contact with intervision before and only knew that it was to be a form of
collegial consultation, peer consulting or peer coaching. She attended the
session without any expectations.*

*Alex, one of the colleagues in the meeting agreed to be the case presenter. Alex
started to talk about the fact that a serious backlash had ruined years of work
of her organization and herself. The whole team was devastated. They had lost
all their hope. They stopped working, hid at home. At the moment, no one in the
team was talking to each other. No one was talking about the situation of the
project and the organization, much less about themselves and how they felt in
the situation.*

*When Kim heard this, she sat up straight. She pricked up her ears, was fully
present. She felt with Alex and her team and could understand their desperation
very well. After she had been sitting in her hole in silence and isolation for so
long, for the first time, she felt emotionally touched and moved again.*

*All the colleagues in the intervision sessions took great interest in Alex' case.
They did not try to talk it away, did not give good advice, did not analyse it with
great theories. They were very grateful that Alex had spoken from the heart.
They gave resonance and offered a space in which the feelings could be there.*

Kim participated actively in the intervention. She was able to offer some perspectives and insights that helped to gain a better understanding of the team's situation. Moreover, she herself understood her own feelings much better.

The next day, the whole group was full of new energy. The country strategy was well processed, and the remaining points of discussion went smoothly and quickly. The group agreed to use the remaining time of the CPS-meeting for dialogue on fundamental issues.

Kim could open her heart freely. When she shared her thoughts, doubts and feelings and the others listened to her and understood her, a dam broke. She felt recognised and appreciated by her colleagues and was very relieved – they did not consider her weak.

She realised that she needed such spaces for reflection. That she needed the connection to others, the authentic conversation about the real issues, the view from the outside and the change of perspectives. She understood that she longed for joint learning processes, for empathy, and for a sense of affiliation and belonging.

In this moment, something changed inside her: her own inner conflict transformed. She understood that all of this was exactly the same in conflict transformation outside. Her needs were so similar to the basic needs of the conflict parties. And the transformation in peace and conflict work could develop in a very similar way to the transformation within herself.

Kim began to climb out of her hole and to see with new eyes. She was starting to explore the connection between inner and outer peace work.

5.1 What can the CPS learn from this story?

It is normal that there are ups and downs in life – also and especially in peace and conflict work. It is important to acknowledge this and not to address it as an individual problem or personal weakness, but to deal with this fact appropriately: not only on a human level, but also on a structural level. Therefore, staff care must be a regular part of the job and part of everyday life. It should start in the preparation and training period, by introducing professionals to intervention and establishing contact with supervisors. During the service, CPS professionals should not have to ask for it when they are unwell – and sharing joy and insights is important for their own well-being and for the success of the work. Besides, psychosocial staff care must also be oriented towards the needs of the peace workers and should include the time of return, which is often very challenging for professionals.

It is not only a matter of recognizing the duty of care, but also of establishing a culture of care. And this culture of care is interwoven with a culture of peace (Boulding 2000), which shows that personal, collective, and global well-being are interconnected (Pigni 2014) and that psychosocial staff care contributes to inner and outer peace work and conflict transformation (Pastoors 2021).

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This article used an experimental design by gathering insights of different CPS-actors and researchers with the method of storytelling. The method of storytelling helped to hear voices from different actors in their unique languages, describing their experiences in their words and reflecting them in their own particular way. The special character of storytelling had an impact on the way the authors reflected on their experiences and the process of writing itself was an instrument to harvest insights in a different way, which is very explorative and highly oriented on the qualitative research paradigm that gives insights on different viewpoints and doesn't aim to be a comprehensible contextual analysis.

The different stories have given insights into the work of the CPS and provided different answers to the three questions that this article is dealing with. Especially the first and second question are strongly connected, therefore the answers to them are summarized.

What have we learned about the topic of partnership in peacebuilding? And what about the power-asymmetries in the work of the CPS?

As we have seen in the first story, we need to critically assess the instrumentalization and rezoning behind partnership. Peace workers as well as institutions should always reflect their own background, traditions, experiences in own conflicts and then ask themselves if partners they work with are only there because they are there. In order to open up the way we understand partnership and in order to challenge existing structural power asymmetries, it could be helpful to create spaces where all involved actors can exchange experiences and mutually learn from each other. In this spirit, actors from the Global North in general and, in the case of the CPS, actors from Germany in particular should be open to learn from an external viewpoint and request help with their own conflicts. This cooperative approach and a more mutual understanding of cooperation can help to create global networks of support. That these networks are already quite helpful, at least on a national level, was indicated by the second story, which shares the insights from a partner organization. When likeminded organizations work together and support each other cooperatively the peace intervention can become impactful. It is important to coordinate capacities and bring together the various expertise. This can only happen, when there is enough space and time for local ownership, as indicated in the third story. Trying to achieve partnership in peacebuilding is in practice is a challenge for all actors involved. All actors come in with a different

background and a different agenda which can lead to misunderstandings and frustrations. Therefore, it is of high relevance, to put local actors in the driver's seat and to sensitize the international peace workers.

And what about looking at the needs and experiences of people working in the area of CPS - what lessons learned do we take from the stories?

The fourth and fifth story are focusing on this question. As indicated in the fourth story, skills and knowledge related to the field are crucial. In order to create and foster the knowledge and skills of the peace workers the provided trainings should be designed as elective trainings that strengthen the role of peace professionals as facilitating and accompanying supporters of peace processes. Also the trainings need to open up and take learnings from unexpected and uncontrolled circumstances into account. But not only these trainings are important, but also an ongoing support and staff care for peace workers, both local and international. As indicated in the last story peace work is relationship work, the human and psychosocial aspects needs to be taken into account in order to make the work successful and sustainable for all actors.

The aim of the CPS is to apply different standards than traditional donor organizations by assigning an active and influential role to local actors and by working in partnership. However, as the stories have shown this role bears some challenges. This is already due to the fact that the CPS as an organization goes into a country and works together with local organizations. Also, the allocation of roles as well as the work parameters do not always take place in a negotiation process. Nevertheless, there are many positive examples within the CPS of how local actors are actively involved in peacebuilding: the network character and the idea of creating ownership for local actors in peacebuilding. Still, these elements are not sufficient to actually speak of partnership on eye-level. Further changes are necessary to challenge existing power dynamics. In order to achieve such changes, a fundamental change are required at many points in the architecture of peacebuilding.

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