

YMCA Europe 'Roots for Reconciliation' Project

Introduction

The Roots for Reconciliation project was established in 2007 with the objective of promoting participatory democracy building and peaceful transformation of the conflicts in the South Caucasus region.

Roots for Reconciliation is a well-designed project addressing cross-border cooperation, peace and reconciliation, YMCA movement strengthening (including leadership development) and resource mobilisation. Central to the way the project works is the promotion of camping and other shared activities that unite young people.

Roots for Reconciliation is implemented by YMCA Europe in co-operation with YMCA Armenia, YMCA Georgia and YMCA in Nagorno Karabagh. The main donors for the project are the German organisation EED and the Dutch organisation ICCO with other support from HEKS/EPER in Switzerland, YMCA Germany, YMCA Netherlands and YMCA of the USA.

Michal Szymanczak Deputy Secretary General of YMCA Europe sees the origins the Roots for Reconciliation project in the 'Catch the Vision' series of YMCA conferences held in Jerusalem, Kosovo, Albania and Armenia. In the YMCA, two main models of work on peace and reconciliation have evolved over the years. The first has a focus on advocacy-related activities and the second, which is favoured by YMCA Europe, involves "getting to know people and putting down roots". This favoured method is consistent with the 'begleitung' approach of grass-roots accompaniment developed in YMCA Europe.

Reconciliation is a process that attempts to transform intense or lingering malevolence among parties previously engaged in a conflict or dispute into feelings of acceptance and even forgiveness of past animosities or detrimental acts.

The Roots for Reconciliation project is based on what are commonly called¹ the 'individual change' and 'healthy relationships and connections' theories of peace-building. The 'individual change' approach believes that peace comes through

¹ Church, Cheyanne and Mark M. Rogers (2006) DESIGNING FOR RESULTS: Integrating Monitoring and Evaluation in Conflict Transformation Programs, US: Search for Common Ground

'transformative change of a critical mass of individuals, their consciousness, attitudes, behaviour and skills. The methods commonly used focus on investing in individual change through training, personal transformation/consciousness raising workshops; relationship-building processes; dialogues and encounter groups and trauma healing'. The 'healthy relationships and connections' theory assumes that peace emerges 'out of a process of breaking down isolation, polarization, prejudice and stereotypes between/among groups' and that 'strong relationships are a necessary ingredient for peace-building. The methods used focus on processes of inter-group dialogue, networking, relationship-building processes; joint efforts and practical programs on substantive problems'.

The model developed by the project which combines both of these approaches has been crucial to the success of the project. The Roots for Reconciliation approach has been summarized as "being modest, not using big words, not being on the front pages of newspapers" but facilitating relationships across the Region that might otherwise have been thought impossible. For Michal Szymanczak, "the Roots for Reconciliation project shows what it means to be a Christian".

Importantly, the project has built on the YMCA movement's strengths. *Roots for Reconciliation* places emphasis on camping as a proven way of developing relationships between young people. The project's commitment to camping is strongly influenced by the experience of the YMCA of the USA where camping has been a successful component of the organisation's work for many decades.

The Roots for Reconciliation project also aims to develop the YMCAs in the region as democratic movements with the intention that "the YMCAs ... will support the democratization and democratic coherence in these countries [of the southern Caucasus]²"

In 2009, YMCA Europe commissioned an external assessment of the Roots for Reconciliation project. The assessment was led by an independent consultant from the UK. In the terms of reference the consultant was asked to make the assessment process as participatory as possible, reflecting the spirit of both the project and the YMCA movement. It was hoped that by actively involving project participants in the design, data gathering and analysis, the assessment would also help to strengthen the capacity of the project and of the three YMCA movements involved in the project.

² Interview with Roots for Reconciliation Coordinator, Vardan Hambarzumyan for Welt Sichten magazine (August 2009)

The external assessment covered the period January 2007 to July 2009 during which a total of 175 participants from twelve countries built relationships across cultural and political divides, for example between Georgia and Russia and between Georgia and Nagorno Karabagh. Those 175 participants accounted for 442 attendances at fourteen major Roots for Reconciliation events. Of the 175 participants, six out of ten were young women – a significant achievement in itself for a region in which women are often under-represented in public life. Careful selection of participants, programming events to appeal to young women and young men and providing a safe and supportive environment have all contributed to young women as well as young men being able to contribute to and benefit from the project.

Cross-border cooperation

At the time of the assessment, the project had organised 14 successful cross-border events (called 'Reunions') in the period from January 2007 to July 2009. One of the most significant achievements in terms of cross-border co-operation has been the project's success in creating a 'cross-border culture' in the YMCA movements in the region. This 'cross-border culture' is a frame of mind that influences all of the work of the YMCAs in the region. It extends beyond the reunions and other events that physically bring people together. The cross-border culture is easy to identify at an individual level between participants (where participants from different countries are in constant contact with one another through the internet and SMS) and at local YMCA level (for example, through camps arranged between local YMCAs in different countries). A general commitment to sharing ideas and finding ways of working together extends beyond the boundaries of the project. At a national level, the cross-border culture is greatly strengthened by the good relationships that have developed between the national YMCA movement office-bearers, the Roots for Reconciliation National Coordinators and the Regional Coordinator of the project.

The project has also laid some very important foundations for extending its cross-border reach. Strong links have developed with YMCA Russia and also with the young people of Beslan School Number 1 in North Ossetia (scene of the mass hostage-taking and its tragic aftermath). There are plans to develop these relationships further in the future. Likewise, the project is exploring how to develop relationships in Turkey and Azerbaijan. This will represent a challenging test of the robustness of the Roots for Reconciliation model and the maturity of the participants.

Peace and reconciliation

Although the project's peace and reconciliation goals are very ambitious given the fragile political situation in the South Caucasus, the approach taken is firmly rooted in the strengths of the YMCA as an organisation and the interests of young people living in the Region.

The peace and reconciliation work of the project has been central to the project's identity. The project has taken an understandably cautious and measured approach to this sensitive work. The peace building approach used in the project derives from the historic strengths of the YMCA movement: building strong and meaningful relationships across cultural divides through a shared Christian faith and shared activities. Roots for Reconciliation has developed an exemplary way of creating a safe space for relationship-building, reflecting the 'Do No Harm' principle of seeking what connects people rather than focusing on what divides them.

As a result, the project has had significant success in bringing together young people from countries in conflict and transforming their understanding of each other and of themselves. Many of the participants have reported that the Roots for Reconciliation project has had a life-changing effect on them.

It is worth remembering that in 2008 – the project's second year – the project had to deal with the outbreak of war between Russia and Georgia. For some projects, the pressures caused by this would have been overwhelming but, characteristically, because the Roots for Reconciliation project could draw deeply on its reserves of mutual concern and goodwill, it was able to grow and mature when other projects might simply have collapsed. The outbreak of war occurred when a delegation of eighty participants from the South Caucasus was attending the YMCA Europe Festival in Prague. As a result, the participants were stranded in Prague. The mutual care and co-operation that was inspired in the face of adversity has gone down in the annals of project history and led the Project Coordinator, Vardan Hambardzumyan, to describe the cooperation that developed at a time of acute conflict as "the most exciting project outcome so far" when interviewed in Summer 2009. His views are echoed by Mikhail Guskov from YMCA Russia. For Mikhail Guskov the ability to sustain a relationship between the YMCAs in Georgia and Russia following the war in 2008 demonstrates the ability of the Roots for Reconciliation project to work effectively even in politically highly sensitive situations.

YMCA movement strengthening

The project has made a very successful contribution to YMCA movement strengthening. By providing leadership training, strengthening programme development (particularly the use of camping programmes) and creating opportunities for collaboration and resource mobilisation, the project has strengthened YMCA capacity at individual, local and national movement levels. In the words of one of the project's National Coordinators, the project has "*a big effect by helping our national YMCA movement develop as a movement and not [just a collection of] local organisations*".

YMCA Europe deputy Director Michal Szymanczak echoes this view. In an interview conducted for the project assessment he emphasised the importance of the Roots for Reconciliation project in creating more self-sustaining YMCA movements in the Region. In his view, the Roots for Reconciliation project is an exemplary project in many ways. Through the project, three YMCA movements have themselves become stronger and close links have been made between them. This has been an important contribution to strengthening civil society in countries where civil society itself is at an early stage of development.

Another significant aspect of movement strengthening – developing financial sustainability – is being addressed through the Community Resource Centre component of the project. Through the project, four Community Resource Centres (two in Armenia, one in Georgia and one in Nagorno Karabagh) are being constructed or renovated as centres for camping and other activities. When the Community Resource Centres are fully operational, they will be used to generate income for the local YMCAs and national YMCA movements.

Resource mobilisation

The project has been very effective at resource mobilisation in terms of leveraging funding and drawing expertise into the YMCA movements in the Region. This is partly down to careful project design and partly to longstanding and constructive relationships with a range of donors.

Tom Valentine, Senior Associate Director, International Group, YMCA of the USA has a long and supportive history with the Roots for Reconciliation project. Tom described the Roots for Reconciliation project as being "built on best practices from

all over the world". He believes that one of the project's biggest strengths is that it is not just a youth program but also addresses movement strengthening. He strongly believes that this combination of institutional development, leadership development and programme development (especially through camping) makes for an impactful project design. Tom is convinced that the model developed by the Roots for Reconciliation project with its focus on bringing young people together through practical programmes such as camping (rather than simply discussing the conflicts) is one that could be developed and scaled up in other parts of the world. In conclusion, he placed the Roots for Reconciliation project as one of the top two or three initiatives he has come across in the YMCA internationally.

The project has benefited from the commitment and enthusiasm of many people who have participated and it would take too much time to list them all here but the excellent leadership of the Project Coordinator deserves particular recognition. His dedication, insight, sensitivity, commitment and ability to facilitate collaborative working relationships have without doubt been instrumental in the success of the Roots for Reconciliation project.

Final words

During the course of the project assessment, some of the young people involved were invited to write their testimony about the Roots for Reconciliation project. The profound effect of the project on some of the participants is clear from the following testimony from an Armenian young woman participant. Her optimism and energy perfectly summarise the spirit of the Roots for Reconciliation project and it is fitting that her words should remain in our minds:

"It's really one of the best periods in my life. These three years in this project I get so much that many people won't be able to get in their whole life. I even don't know how to explain my feelings about this project and its events. There is so much to tell, so many emotions, feelings, stories, memories, people and events ... You don't understand the meaning of the word "war" when you don't see it and its results with your own eyes. And we went to see it. We were in Tbilisi and Gori only two months later after the war. We met with the refugee children and their parents. We worked with them and understand the real meaning of war how horrible it can be. People's lives were changed in few minutes; they lost their houses and become refugees. And I heard stories about how parents were afraid of toy guns or bombs. After seeing these all, of course, I want to live in peaceful region and peaceful world ... As to me I would like this project to go on and on

and never end because it did really very good things and still has a lot to do. I would like to see more and more participants from other countries and one day maybe from the whole world. And I would like to finish with words of Stefan Zweig who said: "*If you want peace - prepare it, prepare, without sparing the forces, every day of your life, each hour of your days*". I think this is the thing that we did, do and hopefully are going to do."