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Foreword

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Foreword

The International Communities Organisation (ICO) is a self-determination research and innovation center and a not-for-profit organization based in London. Guided by its vision of self-determination and the values of development and human rights, ICO aims to empower communities. It strives to foster an environment where organizations within these communities can overcome the barriers they face, allowing them to fulfill their potential and develop and create positive change for their local communities through local action, collaboration, and decision making.

ICO recognizes that the current global system lacks the tools and mechanisms to allow peoples to study, do research, and seek the advice and mentoring they need to make good decisions that are based on international law and that are most likely to be acceptable to other peoples and to their governments. The Princeton University-based Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination held a conference in Triesenberg, Liechtenstein, March 20–22, 2016, on the theme of reconciling self-determination and territorial integrity titled “Models of Self-Governance as Tools to Promote Peace and Stability in Europe.”¹ The conferees explored the on-going tension between the principles of self-determination and territorial integrity and ways to reconcile the two, and it considered how the right to self-determination might be used as a tool for conflict prevention and resolution. An ICO conference held in London in February 2019 titled “Rethinking Self-Determination” complemented the work of the Liechtenstein Institute.

Clearly defined and clearly communicated public opinion can be very powerful. Brexit provides a strong example: the British public voted to leave the European Union even though most political leaders urged the country to stay. Another example is the Northern Ireland peace process during which political leaders were motivated to succeed, in part because of the strong desire for peace among the people of Ireland. In self-determination issues, it is often the public that ultimately decides. In Quebec, for example, the public voted to remain in Canada despite the push for separation by external players and much of the political leadership. And, more recently, in Catalonia, the central government’s insistence on the rule of law and adherence to the constitution is being gradually worn down by the will of the Catalonian people. The impact of public opinion will be influenced as much by how decisive the public feels and how well their feelings can be communicated as it will be by their relationship to the political leadership, the seriousness of the issue under consideration, and whether they get to vote. Nevertheless, political leaders, even those unelected or only nominally elected, need to have the support of the people if their policies are to be successful, and to secure that support they need to know what the people want, what they expect, or what they will allow. History is littered with examples of leaders who were voted out of office or chased out of their palaces because they ignored calls for reform.

Because the borders of many countries were set arbitrarily, some peoples believe that they have been trapped in the wrong country and that they therefore do not receive full political rights. They believe also that they cannot fully express their cultural rights and that they are unable to develop their community as they wish to. When people are given tools to peacefully develop ideas about self-determination that conform to international law, the reasons for conflict will be diminished.

ICO believes that people should be trusted to make the important decisions about their schools, hospitals, and homes for the elderly and about their local planning, public services, and systems of transportation. That trust brings out the best in them,

imbuing them with a sense of responsibility and a willingness to discuss and to compromise. One of the aims of ICO is to give people the tools they need to make their voices heard.

ICO does not take sides. We work with communities to give them opportunities to work for themselves. A community can be a city, a region, or a people in a particular country or more than one country.

To enhance our vision and our credibility as an international organization that works for peoples, we organized the February 2019 London conference on self-determination, where scholars working in self-determination presented their cases and recommendations. We are very excited that those presentations are now available in this self-determination issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy*.

ICO's vision is not to break up countries but to give autonomy to peoples and to allow them to make their own decisions for the best of their community.

What would success look like? Success would be communities getting advice and receiving the training and the research opportunities necessary to develop their thinking and their policy goals in a way and to a standard that is consistent with international law and historic precedent and conforming to rights already enshrined in covenants and treaties. These ideas can be effectively communicated through press conferences at a media center in a new institute ICO proposes to build in Vienna and become policy work through meetings between civil society members and ICO experts.

By allowing communities to be heard, we are encouraging people to follow a peaceful path and to look at alternatives to processes that are perhaps not working. We are empowering communities with ideas, policies, and arguments. Our new institute will be close to the UN campus in Vienna, allowing us to introduce representatives of peoples, communities, cities, and regions to UN ambassadors and to facilitate their interaction with UN economic, social, and cultural affairs committees. ICO will also receive a self-affiliation at the United Nations.

The most exciting part is that all ICO services at the institute will be free. The hotel and the student accommodation that will be part of the center will be run by outside organizations, and the conference center, the lecture halls, and the offices will be available for commercial letting when they are not in use by ICO. We plan to make the institute self-financing and to continue to operate for fifty or a hundred years.

I am grateful for our partnership with the *New England Journal of Public Policy* in the production of this special issue on self-determination. The articles contained here cover the many different aspects and challenges of self-determination and provide a rich variety of examples of where organizations like ICO can work.

James Holmes

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Note

¹ A full report on the proceedings of the colloquium is available at <https://dataspace.princeton.edu/jspui/handle/88435/dsp01jw827f12x>.