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## **Personal Reflections from a Grassroots Peacebuilding Journey**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents the author's personal reflections from experiences over the past thirty years, working at the intersection of leadership development, complexity, and conflict: a journey from corporate law, the British Army, and armed conflict, through the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the US-led coalition's intervention in Iraq, emergency humanitarian response in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and violence reduction and post-conflict reconciliation in Papua New Guinea, to a Jordan-based international peacebuilding organization that supports grassroots peacebuilding efforts in fifty-two countries, and finally a return home to Scotland. It is a journey of naïveté, hubris, curiosity, and an attempt at sense-making. It describes the application of peacebuilding theories in practice in diverse contexts. Although it does not purport to offer any solutions, it concludes that courageous leadership is needed: to embrace conflict as a source of energy for positive, constructive, generative development; to resist the seductive drama and hero-leadership of focusing only on present crises; and to focus more investment on upstream prevention.

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I did not start out as a peacebuilder. Nor was it really planned. Rather, my journey into peacebuilding and conflict transformation was a nonlinear series of moments when I said “yes” to emergent opportunities as they popped up. Over the past thirty years, it is a journey from corporate law, the British Army, and armed conflict, through the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the US-led coalition’s intervention in Iraq, emergency humanitarian response in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and violence reduction and post-conflict reconciliation in Papua New Guinea, to a Jordan-based international peacebuilding organization that supports grassroots peacebuilding efforts in fifty-two countries, and finally a return home to Scotland. It is a journey of naïveté, hubris, curiosity, and an attempt at sense-making. Along the way I learned to let go of many preconceptions I had about how the world works and how change happens, and tested the application of peacebuilding theories in diverse conflict contexts.

I grew up during the last decade of the Cold War and my father was in the British Army, so as a family we moved back and forth between the UK and different postings in Germany. When I started university in 1992, studying law at the University of Edinburgh, the quick succession of events—from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989, to the signing of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty that created EU citizenship and paved the way for the Euro—all seemed to be an affirmation of Western liberal democracy and what Francis Fukuyama called “the end of history.”<sup>1</sup> I had no doubts that conflicts would continue to arise, but I believed that the age of conventional wars, at least in Europe, was indeed over.

That was relevant to me because, in parallel with my career as a corporate lawyer working in the UK and in India, I was also serving in the British Army as an officer in a reconnaissance unit. I found the juxtaposition of those two lives extremely valuable, and I benefited greatly, in different ways, from experiences in each. The difference around leadership was stark. In my corporate law firm, at least at my relatively junior level, leadership seemed rather invisible and was neither spoken about nor explicitly developed, while in the army almost every waking moment was spent thinking and talking about leadership, developing and practicing leadership at every level—not in a rigid hierarchical sense, which may be the stereotypical view of military culture, but striving to develop at every level effective capabilities to take initiative, responsibility, and accountability for rapid assessment of fast-changing situations and adapting a course of action to pursue a mission objective. But one key aspect in common between those legal and military worlds was the importance of a rules-based order and the idea of creating, imposing, and protecting order, especially in the face of chaos and kinetic violence. I felt there was a larger system at play, with clearly established rules of the game that everyone broadly followed, and which supported a trend toward positive progress.

My time in India, working with a law firm in Mumbai, immersed me in a context of contrasts: rich and poor, Bollywood and super-rich tech company elites and those in extreme poverty, vibrant modern digital innovation and a robust traditional caste system, and an Anglo-Saxon legal system overlaid upon the diverse traditional cultures of a subcontinent. I moved there soon after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and I felt that there was a growing uneasy sense that the United States’ strength and pride had been hurt significantly and that the reaction to those attacks would be felt worldwide, far beyond neighboring Pakistan and Afghanistan.

A decade after *The End of History and the Last Man*, and after the lessons and relative successes of interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Sierra Leone, the acutely felt need for robust revenge for 9/11 coincided with strategic interests in Iraqi oil and the height of Western interventionist hubris. When the US-led coalition invaded Iraq and deposed Saddam Hussein, I served as a British Army officer on Operation Telic in Iraq in early 2003 then stayed on

in Iraq through 2003 and 2004 in a role with the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office (Foreign Office), serving in the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the temporary government.

The absurdity and chaos of that chapter in Iraq is immediately apparent from the fact that, for a short time, I was the acting Minister for Youth and Sports for Iraq, with few relevant qualifications for the role other than being available on the ground, expressing an interest in youth and sport, and recognizing their importance both in terms of grassroots youth engagement and high-level national identity. I was one of three “Brits” sitting around the table in L. Paul Bremer III’s CPA cabinet meetings as he appeared to seek to govern Iraq’s transition by spreadsheet. To be fair, the story of the CPA is a mixed bag of successes and failures, and many of the failures were not in Bremer’s control, but some were, including the disastrous first two executive orders he promulgated: CPA Order 1 on “De-Ba’athification of Iraqi Society,” prohibiting any person affiliated to the Ba’ath Party from any role in the top three layers of management of any national government ministry, affiliated corporations, or other government institutions; and CPA Order 2 on “Dissolution of Entities,” disbanding the Iraqi military, security, and intelligence infrastructure of President Saddam Hussein. Ultimately, Bremer was given an impossible mission: a maximalist reform agenda to stand up a model democracy that would serve as a beacon for the entire region, but with a minimalist application of money and people. For me, it was a massive awakening—a Wizard of Oz moment. I saw behind the facade of order and glimpsed, with horror, the catastrophic assumptions and lack of planning laid bare, as the political infighting between Colin Powell’s Department of Defense and Donald Rumsfeld’s State Department played out on the ground with momentous consequences for people’s lives. My hope is that the story of intervention in Iraq may provide an object lesson of the costs and consequences of unprepared intervention and naive attempts at nation-building.

From my military experience (at least from my junior perspective), it also seemed that the US-led coalition in Iraq failed to adhere to the number one principle of war in the UK Defence Doctrine: “selection and maintenance of the aim,” the so-called “master principle.” In November 2022 the publication of the sixth edition of the UK Defence Doctrine made two changes to the long-standing list of ten principles of war, following the failures in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria, and Vladimir Putin’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-blown invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>2</sup> Number six, “concentration of force” became “concentration of effects,” in recognition of the new significance of cyber warfare. Number nine, “cooperation” became “integration,” in recognition that working together while retaining independence (i.e., cooperation) is insufficient, and that much closer linkage of entities and actions into a unified system (i.e., integration) is required. Where the doctrine previously characterized three instruments of national power—diplomatic, military, and economic—information was added as an important fourth instrument. As the updated doctrine notes, “The character of warfare is changing rapidly, driven by the pace and pervasiveness of information and technological change, not least in terms of space and cyber, and in emerging and disruptive technologies. Distinctions between public and private, foreign and domestic, state and non-state, and virtual and physical are blurred.”

At the same time, certainly, my ego was seduced by the sense of adventure and drama in Iraq, the urgency of the mission, and the power to influence things. With a small but dedicated team working out of an office in Saddam Hussein’s Republican Palace in Baghdad, we worked to get all of the Ministry of Youth and Sports staff verified and back to work, and 161 youth center facilities rehabilitated and cleared of debris and military ordnance, so that positive sport, arts, and education programs for male and female youths could be reactivated nationwide.

On the non-governmental side of sport, we were confronted with the history of the National Olympic Committee of Iraq (NOCI), which Uday Hussein (Saddam Hussein's eldest son) had, as its president, run as his own fiefdom. We received delegations with box files of evidence alleging the NOCI's involvement in abuses, from money-laundering and smuggling, to unlawful imprisonment and torture of sportsmen and women, and the sexual abuse of female athletes. Discussing these allegations with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in Lausanne, Switzerland, it became clear that they had received the same evidence over several years but had neither investigated nor suspended NOCI for abuses of the Olympic Charter. With some persuasion, the IOC eventually voted to suspend Iraq on May 17, 2003. Soon afterward, on July 22, 2003, Uday Hussein and his brother Qusay Hussein were killed in a four-hour firefight. The question arose: how to get Iraq back into the Olympic Movement? The answer was to go back to the grassroots of sport structures nationwide, and to conduct a series of democratic elections for sports clubs then national federations for each sport, creating a general assembly for the election of a new NOCI. Led by the Interim Committee to Administer Sport in Iraq, with support from the CPA, the IOC, and the Olympic Council of Asia, more than 600 elections were conducted, for each sports club in each district and each governorate, and then for the national federation for each sport, over five months of an extremely hot summer in 2003 (temperatures exceeded 50°C / 122°F). With the national federation senior office holders forming a general assembly, the final election of a new NOCI was held at Lake Dukan, in Sulaymaniyah Governorate, in the Kurdish north of Iraq, on January 29, 2004 in the presence of IOC observers, leading to the lifting of NOCI's suspension by the IOC on February 27, 2004.

The new NOCI comprised Sunni and Shia Muslims, Christians, Arabs, and Kurds, eleven men and one woman. It caught media attention beyond the sports pages as an example that a democratic process in the "new Iraq" could produce a secular and (relatively, except for gender balance) representative outcome. The successful election triggered the next challenge: with just six months until the Athens Olympic Games, what sort of team would Iraq be able to mobilize to represent that "Iraq is back" on the world stage? A rapid talent identification process produced a list of athletes and their coaches in different sports. Armed with this list, I contacted each of the coalition countries' foreign ministries in turn, seeking their support to host the Iraqi athletes and their coaches for a selected sport in a sport training camp in their country until the Olympics. Fast, positive responses enabled us to get all of the individual athletes and their coaches out of the country on sport scholarships in host countries. The soccer team, however, remained in Iraq, being too large as a squad to be hosted for six months at the expense of another country, but with a remarkable German coach, Bernd Stange, they progressed through their qualification matches.

Because other teams considered it too dangerous to come to Baghdad, the Iraqi Olympic soccer team ended up playing all of their "home" matches in neighboring Jordan, with significant support from the Jordanian Olympic Committee under its president, His Royal Highness Prince Feisal Al Hussein. We flew in and out of Iraq in military C-130 "Hercules" aircraft, seated in body armor and helmets on the red canvas webbing seats in rows down the length of the fuselage. Despite the context of chaos and insecurity, power cuts, and increasing lawlessness growing in Iraq, the young, talented team kept their focus, and kept winning. On those occasions when I remained in Baghdad instead of traveling with the team, it became clear how the team was becoming a powerful symbol of a united Iraq. Standing on a rooftop in Baghdad each evening, one could listen to sporadic gunfire and watch green and red tracer fire being exchanged in horizontal arcs in different neighborhoods across the city. But when the Iraqi Olympic soccer team's match started on TV, the shooting ceased: everyone was watching the match and united in cheering for

the Iraqi team. Each time, of course, Iraq won; and each time, their victory was hailed with celebratory gunfire across the city, with the red and green tracer fire shooting vertically into the night sky for twenty minutes or so, until eventually it reverted to the customary horizontal exchanges.

The security situation deteriorated progressively month by month. There were numerous improvised explosive device attacks—mainly car and truck bombs—attempted on the Green Zone or targeting high profile convoys. I was uncomfortably close to the receiving end of AK-47 gunfire on one occasion (although not, I think, personally targeting me), and frequent mortar attacks into the Green Zone, where I worked in the palace and where I slept in a trailer in the palace grounds. One mortar round exploded on the roof of our office in the palace, with remarkably little structural damage to the solid concrete roof, but blasting in all of the windows and sending shattered glass across our office, fortunately an hour before our working day started. With each mortar attack, we came to expect that there would be four or five shells at most before those firing would need to move, knowing that the coalition forces had the capability to identify mortar firing positions and have a helicopter and vehicle rapid reaction force on location within minutes. Typically, one would hear the whistle of the first mortar shell coming in, hit the deck on the spot, and count the blasts. After a longer pause following a fourth or fifth round, one judged that the attack was over and would get up, dust oneself off, and resume one's routine. About thirty seconds later the security loudspeakers across the palace complex would broadcast a loud, rather belated, "Take cover! Take cover!" message. I was also sleeping in the Al Rasheed Hotel on October 26, 2003, when it was hit early in the morning by six rocket propelled grenades in quick succession, killing one person and inflicting life-changing injuries on fifteen others. Amid these different attacks, I felt a mix of things. First, that I deployed initially on a military tour and that such risks should not be unexpected; second, that the probabilities of being impacted were something of a roll of the dice and that while the consequences of impact could be extremely serious indeed, the overall probability was still very low; and that it was a question of following training and maintaining situational awareness and vigilance, focusing on measures within one's control without becoming paralyzed into inaction.

In my role with the CPA, I was expected to follow Foreign Office security protocols. For any meetings outside the protected Green Zone, this required me to book in advance and travel in a two-vehicle convoy, with each vehicle being a shiny new white armored Toyota Land Cruiser, each with two ex-military security contractors, two of whom would then be my close protection bodyguards attending meetings with me. In addition, I was to travel wearing body armor and a helmet. I quickly discovered that arriving to any meeting with external stakeholders in such a manner prevented me from making progress. The physical security measures presented significant barriers to nurturing the relationships I was seeking to establish. The conspicuous three-vehicle convoy also projected me as a much more high-value VIP target than I felt I deserved. On one occasion, at a symbolic tree-planting ceremony for the new National Olympic Committee of Iraq, a single rifle shot rang out and my bodyguard leapt on me and bundled me into an adjacent bush. I felt grateful for his instinctive reactions to protect my safety, but embarrassed that none of my Iraqi colleagues had given the shot as much attention. I asked him to get off me, dusted myself off, and we carried on with planting the tree and envisioning what the future of Iraq might be as the tree grew taller.

I decided something had to give. I saw others in CPA roles restricting their movements to the Green Zone and avoiding any external meetings entirely, thereby placing on their Iraqi counterparts and stakeholders the sole risk and significant inconvenience of queuing to go through

the security procedures to enter the Green Zone. I chose a different strategy. I bought a discrete but solid saloon car and drove myself around. I felt much less conspicuous and like less of a target. The relationships with my Iraqi counterparts changed visibly, as they understood the risks I was taking and my commitment to make progress together with them. They, in turn, began to show a sense of responsibility for my security, and I found their intelligence and assessment of the security situation and risks related to particular locations or events to be more timely and precise than the security assessments I received through official coalition channels. A lingering question in my mind is whether anyone in the Foreign Office noticed that my requests for official security for moves outside the Green Zone dropped to zero, and if so, whether a blind eye was turned without raising the subject with me, perhaps because they saw that I was making some progress.

Far worse were the daily risks taken by Iraqis. Many of the improvised explosive device (IED) bombings targeted main roads used by coalition forces, from the airport into the city, and especially around entrances to the Green Zone. These attacks inflicted far more deaths and life-changing injuries on Iraqi civilians than on coalition personnel. Iraqis working in the CPA faced a growing risk of being identified and targeted as coalition sympathizers. It remains deeply distressing to me that our small CPA Youth and Sports team was not immune from this. One morning Ahmad Hassan, one of our four young Iraqi colleagues, was shot dead in a targeted assassination: a single shot to the back of the head as he left his home to make his way to the Green Zone to work in our office. I received the news via a call from Ahmad's mobile later that afternoon, from a French journalist at a local hospital writing a story about victims of an unrelated IED attack close to the Green Zone that day. Because he spoke English, the journalist had been asked by the hospital staff to call my number, because my name showed up on Ahmad's phone's most recent missed calls list. I alerted the CPA authorities of the news and then, in breach of a security lock-down due to the IED, I drove out of the Green Zone to the hospital to locate and identify Ahmad's body. I wanted to be absolutely sure, before informing his family and his Iraqi colleagues in our team at the CPA. The scene of carnage in the hospital morgue—an overflow morgue improvised from a shipping container and without any refrigeration—was gruesome, with Ahmad lying alongside so many bodies and parts of bodies from the IED explosion.

In this context, we kept chipping away at our work with the ministry and its programs in youth centers nationwide, until the June 30, 2004 official handover to a new Iraqi government and a new Minister for Youth and Sports. On the Olympic side, following the handover, I stayed on in Iraq to support the new NOCI to prepare for the Athens 2004 Olympic Games. It was an extraordinary, good news story that at those Olympic Games, Iraq was represented by twenty-five athletes in seven sports, including men's soccer, and I was so proud to travel with the team to the Olympics and support their management. More extraordinary still: the soccer team continued their winning form in Athens, eventually coming fourth after losing 2 to 1 to Italy in the play-off match for the bronze medal. That was undoubtedly a high point for me, both personally and professionally. After the Olympics, I continued to work with the NOCI in a private consulting capacity, now living outside the Green Zone, advising on their strategy and sponsorship deals, before eventually leaving Iraq amid a worsening security situation that was sliding rapidly into open anarchy, lawlessness, and civil war. As one example, amid the many stories of kidnappings for extortion, which were generally not of foreign officials but any Iraqi considered affluent—doctors, lawyers, and businessmen—came a story in which a militia group at a checkpoint near Sadr City had brazenly “kidnapped” a coffin from the roof of a car, when the family inside was on its way to bury their loved one killed earlier that day, and extorted a ransom for return of the coffin.

After Iraq, while decompressing, I spent time completing an Executive Masters in Management at Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1, basing myself in Chamonix, France to alternate my studies with paragliding, climbing, and skiing. After what I felt were unique contextual conditions in Iraq, I was keen to learn about more typical, mainstream, international development and started job hunting. I was still unmarried and mobile, and deliberately identified South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) as contexts with intense challenges where I could learn a lot. I was offered jobs in each and chose a role in the DRC with an Irish non-governmental organization (NGO) called GOAL, based in Goma in Eastern DRC on the border with Rwanda, and working from there in remote communities in Lulingu, South Kivu and Manono, Katanga.

While I had spent time traveling in Egypt, Morocco, and South Africa, for me, flying to Kigali in Rwanda in 2005 then entering the DRC through the border crossing at Gisenyi, and later traveling from Goma to Lulingu and Manono, felt like a journey into the heart of the African continent. I was acutely aware that I was carrying with me on this journey my white, male, privileged, middle class, colonial legacy, including my most recent identities related to my roles with the British Army and Foreign Office in Iraq. The prevailing winds of intractable conflict and violence in the DRC, sustained by systemic forces within and beyond its borders, made it difficult for me to resist associations with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>3</sup> The humanitarian emergency response work was intoxicating in its intensity, its drama and tragedy, its daily heroism and relentless dynamism. But it was also soul-destroying, when reflecting that such an emergency had been going on for decades (and, sadly, has continued for decades after I left).

We worked in response to the ebbs and flows of fighting, providing emergency food and shelter to people fleeing for their lives, carrying what little they could as they fled their villages into the jungle. The most heart-breaking of all was the emergency therapeutic feeding stations for starving babies and their mothers. In between the emergency work, we developed a network of health extension workers and medical supply chains for each community, rolled out vaccination programs, drilled water wells and introduced sanitation programs, and provided support for agriculture projects for local food production and other sustainable livelihoods for income generation. A key channel for awareness programs was sport activities, which for me echoed the way that grassroots sport-based approaches had proved useful in Iraq. Also echoing my experience in Iraq, I found that our security came far more from building trust and relationships with the local community, who valued our presence, felt responsibility for our safety, and provided far more timely and precise knowledge of security threats than the international NGO community or local United Nations agencies.

The remote communities that we served in Lulingu, South Kivu, were accessible from Goma only by air. The old road connections to Goma were completely impassable: long-neglected and consumed by the jungle. But within each location there were some rough tracks passable on motorbikes and quad bikes pulling small trailers. The local airstrip, cut from the jungle, was short and limited incoming aircraft to the size of a Cessna Grand Caravan, with a small payload capacity of only 1,400 kg. These factors presented a major constraint on the overall capacity of our aid operation to support supply chains for emergency food and shelter, medicines and vaccines, and equipment for water and agriculture projects. I wondered whether we could re-examine the parameters and explore the art of the possible. I asked: "Would a four-wheel drive vehicle, like a Toyota Land Cruiser, be useful in Lulingu, if we could get it there?" The answer was "yes, but of course such a vehicle would not fit in a Cessna Grand Caravan." But it would if we took it apart. And so, we dismantled a brand-new Toyota Land Cruiser and sent the pieces into Lulingu's tiny



airstrip on three consecutive flights, with our mechanic on the third flight and people placing bets on whether he would manage successfully to piece the vehicle back together again. After twenty-four hours the vehicle was operational, and with a larger trailer also flown in, it expanded the load-carrying capacity ten-fold overnight.

While that felt like a success and I was learning a lot, and the daily aid we were providing was certainly saving lives, I still felt grossly inadequate to really make a significant difference. While I was pondering this, a scorpion's tail in Iraq came back to sting.

On July 15, 2006, the NOCI held its annual general meeting in Baghdad, attended by all of the officials I had worked with so closely as colleagues, except two committee members who were abroad attending sport events. In the middle of the meeting, about sixty uniformed gunmen stormed the conference venue. After shooting two bodyguards dead, and letting the drivers and junior staff go, they abducted the president, Ahmad Al Samarraï, the secretary general, Amer Jabbar, and all of the other elected committee officials except for the vice president, Bashar Mustafa (local speculation was that this was possibly because of his Kurdish identity). The twenty-four officials abducted have never been seen again, and their bodies never recovered. While no one claimed responsibility for the abduction and murder, most fingers pointed directly to the new Shia government itself.

Reeling from the news, this moment felt like another awakening for me. I glimpsed the bigger forces at play and the horrific audacity of raw power using violence to achieve political objectives. For a brief time, the story of sport-for-development in Iraq had been a good news story, both at grassroots levels in youth centers and at the national level as a symbol of Iraqi national identity and pride. I still believed in the power of sport in both of these domains, but had been chastened to qualify that belief with a deeper appreciation for the bigger forces at work and the lack of limits to their exercise of power. Indeed, this echoed what I was feeling in the DRC, that bigger forces at play were locking the system into intractable violence, with the majority—especially the most poor and most vulnerable—suffering and losing the most, while others were clearly thriving and winning from the status quo. For me, in both Iraq and the DRC, I felt like I was a small pawn on a chess board, without full knowledge of all the pieces or even how big the board was and how many other pieces were in play, out of sight. It made me determined to learn more and to figure out how to have an impact further upstream, on violence reduction and prevention, rather than responding to the downstream effects of violence.

From the DRC, in 2006 I moved to Papua New Guinea (PNG), first to design and then to lead the first four years of a ten-year Sport For Development Initiative—a nationwide grassroots violence reduction program as part of the Australian government's bilateral support to the PNG government. This large and long-term investment was a response to widespread violence in PNG. In Bougainville, one of the largest islands, there had been a decade of civil war from 1988 to 1998, and a lot of work remained to be done on post-conflict reconciliation and peacebuilding. Across the country, urban areas were dominated by criminality, gang violence, and youth violence, fueled by home-brewed alcohol and lack of positive opportunities for youth. At the time, the capital city, Port Moresby, was ranked the most violent city in the world outside of an actual war zone. Up in the highlands, there was significant violence in the form of tribal fighting, often using traditional bows and arrows, knives, and axes, with the more recent appearance of the occasional (and sometimes homemade) firearm. Across all communities there was pervasive violence against women. There was also violence associated with HIV and AIDS and beliefs linking it to sorcery.

It was in the remote, isolated communities of the highlands and islands of PNG, in forests swirling with deep beliefs in spirits and sorcery, that I really began to learn to let go of my Western

preconceptions, mental models, heuristics, and assumptions about what is going on. I learned to let go, to slow down, to withhold judgment, and to just be open and curious. “The system makes sense to itself, even if it doesn’t yet make sense to me” became my mantra. “Seek first to understand” became my primary task. That mantra and that primary task served me well in PNG and in all my experiences since, when stepping into any new country, community, organization, team, or board room.

In PNG, compared with the urgency and intensity of Iraq and the DRC, I had the luxury of taking time for a thorough six-month design process, traveling the country and engaging with the diverse and unique cultures of isolated communities, which allowed for a truly participatory design. That, in turn, flowed directly into a participatory programming philosophy that embraced that diversity and complexity, and took a strengths-based approach to leverage local resources and capabilities, including the potential of youth-led and women-led initiatives, and the power of sport-based approaches to providing an entry point for community engagement and a vehicle for education and behavior change.

In 2007, while I was in PNG, His Royal Highness Prince Feisal Al Hussein of Jordan founded an international initiative called Peace Through Sport, with a mission to use grassroots sport activities in communities to address local issues of conflict and violence. A year later, the initiative was formally established as Generations For Peace (GFP): the change of name intentionally providing a broader scope for activities such as arts-based and advocacy programs, to complement and reinforce sport-based approaches. I visited Jordan in 2009 to attend a GFP camp for young peacebuilding leaders from around the world. It was inspiring and thought-provoking. I shared some feedback and the approaches we had developed in PNG, but I saw a lot of potential in GFP and a seed was also sown. In January 2011, I moved from PNG to Jordan to take up a role serving as CEO of GFP.

I arrived in Amman just before the Arab Spring and served as CEO for twelve years, through the Syrian refugee crisis, the rise of violent extremism and of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as Daesh, Vladimir Putin’s annexation of Crimea and later full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the COVID-19 pandemic. During that time, we grew the organization eleven-fold, trained more than 22,000 peacebuilders, and supported their grassroots programs in communities in diverse contexts in fifty-two countries worldwide. The contexts included inter-tribal, inter-ethnic, and inter-religious violence; violent extremism; gender inequality; post-conflict trauma response, reconciliation, and reintegration; exclusion of minorities including internally displaced people (IDPs), refugees, and people with a disability; and challenges of social cohesion and integration in multi-cultural societies. The type of programs also expanded to six “vehicles for peace,” used in varying combinations in different communities: sports, arts, advocacy, dialogue, economic empowerment, and media for peace. GFP gained recognition for its impact and was ranked twenty-fifth in the top 200 social good organizations (SGOs) in the world, the number three peacebuilding SGO in the world, and the number one SGO in the Arab world.<sup>4</sup>

GFP identifies itself explicitly as a “peacebuilding” organization, dedicated to sustainable conflict transformation at the grassroots in communities. Although many of the aims of peacebuilding overlap with those of peacemaking, peacekeeping, and conflict resolution, peacebuilding is a distinct idea. Peacemaking involves stopping an ongoing conflict, whereas peacebuilding happens before a conflict starts or once it ends. Peacekeeping prevents the resumption of fighting following a conflict; it does not address the underlying causes of violence or work to create societal change, as peacebuilding does. Peacekeeping also differs from peacebuilding in that it only occurs after conflict ends, not before it begins. Conflict

resolution, strictly defined, would not include some components of peacebuilding, such as state building and socioeconomic development.

While some use the term peacebuilding to refer only to post-conflict or post-war contexts, most use the term more broadly to refer to any stage of conflict. Before conflict becomes violent, preventive peacebuilding efforts, such as diplomatic, economic development, social, educational, health, legal, and security sector reform programs, address potential sources of instability and violence. This is also termed conflict prevention. Peacebuilding efforts aim to manage, mitigate, resolve, and transform central aspects of the conflict through official diplomacy as well as through civil society peace processes and informal dialogue, negotiation, and mediation. Peacebuilding addresses economic, social, and political root causes of violence and fosters reconciliation to prevent the return of structural and direct violence. Peacebuilding efforts aim to change beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors to transform the short- and long-term dynamics between individuals and groups toward a more stable, peaceful coexistence. Peacebuilding is an approach to an entire set of interrelated efforts that support peace.

The Norwegian sociologist, Johan Galtung, coined the term peacebuilding in 1975, arguing that “peace has a structure different from, perhaps over and above, peacekeeping and ad hoc peacemaking. [...] The mechanisms that peace is based on should be built into the structure and be present as a reservoir for the system itself to draw up. [...] More specifically, structures must be found that remove causes of wars and offer alternatives to war in situations where wars might occur.”<sup>5</sup> Galtung’s work emphasized a bottom-up approach that decentralized social and economic structures, amounting to a call for a societal shift from structures of coercion and violence to a culture of peace. John Paul Lederach further developed the model of peacebuilding focused on getting beyond addressing the presenting issues of direct violence (to achieve so-called “negative” peace) to work on the deeper issues of structural violence (to achieve so-called “positive” peace) and cultural violence (to achieve so-called “just” peace).<sup>6</sup>

Cultural violence is manifested in cultural narratives that portray in-group and out-group traits of identity. Such identity differences become cultural violence when referred to as the reason to justify treating a person differently. In this way cultural violence can then legitimize and normalize structural violence and, ultimately, direct violence. In every country I worked in, the cultural, structural, and in some cases direct violence often related to identity divides: inter-tribal violence in Papua New Guinea and Northwest Pakistan; inter-ethnic violence in the Balkans and the Caucasus; inter-religious violence in the Middle East, Nigeria, and Sri Lanka; violence against migrants, internally displaced people, and refugees; violence against those with disabilities; and sexual and gender-based violence absolutely everywhere.

As CEO of GFP, and as a Steering Group member of the global peacebuilding coalition known as +Peace, I was directly involved, with GFP, in the 2018 +Peace campaign to get the word “peacebuilding” into the dictionary. Today, the Oxford Reference Dictionary defines “peacebuilding” as “a variety of measures aimed at solidifying peace and avoiding future conflict in a society, undertaken by actors such as government agencies and civil society organizations. Peacebuilding measures include overseeing the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration into peaceful society of warring parties, electoral support, rebuilding political and economic institutions, and supporting local capacities to manage differences without turning to violence.” Some argue that peacebuilding is a manifestation of liberal internationalism, but I believe properly demand-driven, responsive peacebuilding efforts need not necessarily be directed toward liberal democracy.

The +Peace global peacebuilding coalition also established, as one of its projects, the global Peace in Our Cities campaign, focused on working to halve urban violence by 2030. In 2019, the campaign noted that while more than half a million people die violently every year, only eighteen percent of violent deaths take place in conflict zones; eighty-two percent of victims of lethal violence are killed in homes, towns, cities and countries that are ostensibly “at peace.” While conflict deaths increased ninety-five percent during 2021 to 2022, primarily due to wars in Ukraine and Ethiopia, still less than one-third of violent deaths take place in conflict zones. So it is important to understand that we tend to demonstrate a cognitive bias around conflict deaths, causing many to think they are a larger percentage of violent deaths, perhaps fueled by the drama-bias of news media about conflict.

While getting to grips with the new challenge of leading an organization engaged in such complex work, in 2011 and 2012 I completed a Masters in Consulting and Coaching for Change, delivered jointly by University of Oxford’s Saïd Business School and HEC Paris. It furnished me with a valuable smorgasbord of theoretical models, academic research, and practitioner experiences—encompassing systems theory, complexity theory, and complex adaptive systems, theories of individual and collective learning, theory of action, psychodynamics, cognitive neuroscience, transitional change, agency, adaptive leadership, and reflection-in-action—which I devoured hungrily, combined with theories of trauma, identity, social capital, international development, conflict transformation and peacebuilding, and contact theory, and synthesized into applications for the peacebuilding mission of GFP.

I saw that the burgeoning field of sport for peace and development, and peacebuilding more broadly, faced a need to close the gap between rhetoric and reality; to connect theory and praxis. A key difficulty in many well-intentioned peacebuilding programs was a lack of precision in the overall theory of change underpinning the intervention. The focus too often seemed immediately to be on the design and implementation of activities, rather than on the analysis of the situation and the choice of an appropriate change strategy. Grassroots peacebuilding practitioners found the theory too complex, too inaccessible, or too distant from their practical concerns. To close the gap between rhetoric and reality, and to connect theory and praxis, requires peacebuilding practitioners to be much more rigorous in the following: devoting sufficient attention to careful analysis and deep understanding of the local context; maintaining a tight focus on particular precise desired outcomes, rather than diluting effort across too many desired outcomes; specifying the theory of change for each intervention, and articulating a strong causal connection between each link in the chain from inputs to outputs to desired outcomes and longer term impacts; and embracing complexity and adopting an adaptive approach toward transformational change.

Viewing peacebuilding essentially as a change process—an adaptive leadership challenge within complex adaptive systems—prompted me to embrace theory as metaphor and explore multiple different theoretical frames to see how they might each provide useful insights into the underlying processes of change in peacebuilding interventions, serving to better inform the diagnosis and analysis of the conflict situation, the most appropriate choice of change strategy, and the design, implementation, and evaluation of such programs.

My masters’ thesis research confirmed the challenges peacebuilding practitioners faced in explicitly articulating a theory of change, and their tendency to skip diagnosis and analysis and jump straight into program design and implementation.<sup>7</sup> But their interview responses also identified some common aspects of their programs that appeared to confirm support for many of the theoretical frames discussed in the literature. While seeking to “demystify theory” for easier application by practitioners, I also sought to “re-mystify practice,” by showing how use of an

organizational toolbox of multiple theoretical frames, to be selected and used in combination, could provide a richer praxis and more flexible, nonlinear, adaptive, context-sensitive approach that avoids “one size fits all” repetition or over-simplification.

In applying this thinking to grassroots peacebuilding work with GFP, in diverse contexts around the world, I recognized the following:

(a) Cultural and structural violence are soft complexity “wicked problems,” and conflict transformation requires acting within a complex dynamic system through local action and a nonlinear, flexible and adaptive process.<sup>8</sup>

(b) Much more effort should be dedicated to diagnosis and analysis of the conflict context and the current situation, working back from episodes of conflict to their generative epicenter, in order to understand more deeply the systemic dynamics at play and the underlying personal, relational, cultural, and structural dimensions of the conflict.

(c) In seeking to address deep cultural and structural violence, community programs are most effective when operating on the principle of local action, and seeking to create a social movement for change at the grassroots level within a community, in a manner that demonstrates a deep understanding of the power relations of the local political context and the history and artifacts of local cultural identities.

(d) The type of intervention and the target group must be very carefully selected if the program is to be focused on making the most difference.

(e) The activity must provide a new, neutral “container”—both a transitional space and a transitional object—for facilitating individual and collective behavior change. The space offered can provide an opportunity to interrupt and inhibit negative reinforcing feedback loops that sustain protracted conflict.

(f) Inter-group sport activity, especially if in mixed teams, provides an opportunity for generating task interdependence within which people from different groups can connect and engage and explore “differences” and have new “exchanges” that allow for perspective-taking, perspective-breaking, and perspective-making.

(g) Activities must be fun and must be repeated and regular over a long period of time, supported by coaching and mentoring relationships, to effect real behavior change that will be sustained. Role plays and drills played out in the safe transitional space of the container should rehearse the micro-tactics needed to demonstrate new behavior outside the container.

(h) Above all, sport for peace programs are not simply about playing sport. The characteristics of sport situations provide some peer groups and powerful dynamics for interaction and engagement, but it requires deep understanding of the context, and strong competencies in advocacy and facilitation to create the holding “container,” mobilize and attract participants, and regulate the distress at a constructive level for positive learning and attitudinal change.

One particular theoretical frame that I found useful in practical application was the five colors model developed by Leon De Caluwé and Hans Vermaak as an attempt to organize the array of diverse theories of change in a meta-framework.<sup>9</sup> Their effort was focused on theories of organizational change, but I saw an opportunity to apply their meta-framework to grassroots peacebuilding work, as an organizing structure to help peacebuilders to get to grips with different theoretical perspectives and gain different insights. De Caluwé and Vermaak use five colors to distinguish between five different ways of thinking about “change,” which in turn drive different paradigms for thinking through five stages of action: analysis and diagnosis; choice of change strategy; actual intervention; and evaluation and reflection. For me, working with grassroots volunteer peacebuilders in diverse communities around the world, the attractiveness of the five

colors framework as a meta-theory is in its ability to organize, and thereby make more accessible, a diverse range of approaches. The use of colors and the simplicity of the five colors model provides an intuitive shared language that is visual and carries some immediate warmth. This makes it memorable and accessible, and therefore useful across different language barriers, cultures, backgrounds, and levels of education. I have presented the framework and its application in more detail elsewhere, but in its simplest form the Five Colors Meta-Framework is an accessible, memorable, and practical five-by-five matrix as shown in Figure 1, below.<sup>10</sup>

	<b>Yellow</b> Power and Politics	<b>Blue</b> Rational Mechanical Technical	<b>Red</b> Emotions and Identity	<b>Green</b> Learning Growing Coaching	<b>White</b> Self- Organizing Adaptive Systems
<b>1. Diagnosis/Analysis</b>					
<b>2. Choice of Change Strategy</b>					
<b>3. Intervention Design Process</b>					
<b>4. Intervention Implementation</b>					
<b>5. Evaluation/Reflection</b>					

**Figure 1.** Five Colors Meta-Framework.<sup>11</sup>

Applying the framework to grassroots peacebuilding, it became clear that (a) it is important to devote time and effort to each one of the five stages of intervention; (b) at each stage, it is useful to gain insights from thinking through all five colors; (c) grassroots peacebuilders need the capacity to react to context and program events and to change the color of their approach in response; and (d) grassroots peacebuilders tend to adopt a variety of roles evolving over time, but perhaps primarily a role as a facilitator or change agent.

Conclusions from my research applying the framework with grassroots peacebuilders across a variety of contexts and programs included the following:<sup>12</sup>

(a) There is generally a mix of two or more colors in each approach, but Blue was perhaps the least dominant. The need to persist and not give up when faced with failure points to White colored experimentation and trial and error (i.e., “You need to be flexible and adapt; there is no one correct way”).

(b) Yellow thinking appears to be a success factor; grassroots peacebuilding programs would probably benefit from deeper diagnosis and analysis of the local power relations and politics. Yellow-colored relationships of power and political processes seem likely to be particularly important in conflict contexts, along with Red-colored issues of identity.

(c) Blue thinking seems to be the least appropriate for conflict transformation, and where programs were less successful it could be due to too great an emphasis on a Blue-colored approach. But it is acknowledged that aspects of Blue thinking will still be required in planning and implementing the more “technical” pieces of a program, and in responding to Blue demands from stakeholders, including international development donors.

(d) An adaptive, generative, flexible and incremental process is likely to be more successful than a (Blue) process of planned change. Readiness of the target group and other participants is critical and several program phases may be required to generate readiness for the main intervention and openness to learning.

(e) Grassroots peacebuilders emphasize the importance of engaging with people emotionally and that “seeing is believing,” implicitly emphasizing Red thinking and John Kotter and Dan Cohen’s “see – feel – change” dynamic.<sup>13</sup>

(f) Where there was evidence of Green double-loop learning, there seemed to be greater program success.

(g) White thinking seem to be underestimated and could be worthy of greater attention by grassroots peacebuilding practitioners. White-colored understanding of systems dynamics and adaptive change processes seems to offer promising possibilities for conflict transformation and Green-colored thinking promises ways for individual and collective learning of new behavior (what Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön might call Model II behavior) that seems important for sustainability.<sup>14</sup>

These reflections flowed into the new Programming Framework for GFP, introduced across all programs worldwide in 2013. The framework, summarized visually in a grid shown in Figure 2 below, guides the participatory design of a program through initial conflict analysis, construction of a theory of change, and development of a robust program logic, with clearly identified inputs, activities, and outputs, intended to have specific measurable outcomes on the specific target group, and specific impacts on the wider beneficiary community. The framework then supports monitoring, reflection and learning during implementation, and participatory evaluation that captures quantitative and qualitative data at the end of the program period.

At its core are the principles of the participatory approach we had developed and crafted in PNG. GFP facilitators (staff and the more experienced volunteers) train and mentor local peacebuilders (volunteers) to lead participatory processes in their community for conflict analysis, community needs assessment, construction of a theory of change and program logic, and then detailed program design. Importantly, it is the community themselves who identify their priorities for action and articulate indicators of what successful impact would look like. The community also leads evaluation of program activities against the indicators they set. In this way, real ownership of decision-making and sense-making is vested firmly within the community.

In 2018, five years after this Programming Framework was introduced, GFP published a compendium of 114 community-generated participatory indicators of peace, developed and used in GFP programs in twenty-seven countries across three continents.<sup>15</sup> Fourteen percent of the 114 indicators related to aspects of conception of self; fifty-four percent related to knowledge, beliefs and attitudes; eighteen percent related to behavior and practices; and thirteen percent related to community structures.

While GFP’s focus was on grassroots peacebuilding activities in communities, over time, as programs succeeded in demonstrating positive impacts, they generated trust, credibility, and more support within a country, and new opportunities emerged and were exploited to connect upward from grassroots to a nationwide scale. For example, in Sri Lanka, GFP’s community grassroots people-to-people reconciliation programs connected at the district level with District Inter-Religious Committees, and upward to inform the National Peace Council in its work in driving national truth and reconciliation processes and transitional justice processes. The work on these processes was also passed down to grassroots for consumption in communities, creating a feedback loop between local and national levels.

Generations For Peace (GFP) | M&E Grid | Version 10/04/2013

PROGRAMME INFO:		Country:	City/Town:	Lead Delegate / Pioneer name:	Programme Name:	Baseline Date:	Evaluation Date:		
BEFORE	CONFLICT ANALYSIS	<b>Conflict Context:</b> • What is the issue of conflict/ violence that you want to address? • Who are the different "sides" to the conflict?		<b>What dimension(s) of conflict are you focused on in this programme?</b>					
	THEORY OF CHANGE	<b>Is your focus on Personal dimension?</b> (Consider individual feelings of weakness or empowerment, attitudes and individual behaviour)		<b>Is your focus on Relational dimension?</b> (Consider quality of relationships, interactions, cooperation, and conflict management between people and groups)		<b>Is your focus on Structural dimension?</b> (Consider inequality, unfairness, exclusion, discrimination, lack of transparency or access, or restrictions of rights)	<b>Is your focus on Cultural dimension?</b> (Consider values promoted and demonstrated in a community; what behaviour and language are acceptable or not, what labels are used, what is celebrated, who are role models)		
	PROGRAMME LOGIC	<b>If: (we do something...)</b> (eg: if we bring youth from these two communities together for ongoing SPY activities each week over six months...)		<b>Then: (something will change...)</b> (eg: then we will see reduction in violence between youths from these communities...)		<b>Because: (of something...)</b> (eg: because the SPY activities will allow them to gain new perspectives of each other, break down stereotypes, build greater understanding and trust.)	<b>Target Group:</b> (the people you want to involve directly in as participants in the Training and the regular Ongoing Activities)	<b>Beneficiary Community:</b> (the people you want to benefit from the change created by the programme)	
DURING	MONITORING <i>Gathering evidence of what's happening</i>	<b>Key Stakeholders and the Inputs they will provide:</b>		<b>Planned Activities and Dates:</b> (Events: SPE, ADPE; Training: SPT, ARPT, EPT, ADPT, DPT, TTT; Ongoing Activities: SPCC, SPY, ARPP, EPP, ADPP, DPP)		<b>Planned Outputs:</b> (number of people trained and levels of participation in ongoing regular activities)		<b>Expected Outcomes in the Target Group:</b> (describe expected changes in frequency and quality of interactions: for example, changes in attitude or behaviour)	<b>Expected Impacts in the Beneficiary Community:</b> (describe expected changes in broader community: for example, improved relations or reduced violence)
		<b>Risks and Assumptions:</b>		<b>Risks and Assumptions:</b>		<b>Evidence Indicator of Outcomes:</b> (What one thing will you measure to show Outcomes and how will get that information?)		<b>Evidence Indicator of Impacts:</b> (What one thing will you measure to show Impacts, and how will get that information?)	
AFTER	EVALUATION <i>Understanding what happened and why, then learning and planning improvements</i>	<b>Learning and Reflection Process:</b> • In what ways is learning and reflection happening: ○ Amongst the Delegates/ Pioneers? ○ Amongst the Target Group? • What is the process to ensure lessons-learned are being used?		<b>Total # of volunteers (Delegates &amp; Pioneers) active this year:</b> Male      Female		<b>Total # of hours this year spent volunteering:</b> hours      Male      Female		<b>Outcomes Indicator Baseline situation and Date measured:</b> (how the indicator looks when you start, and the date you measured it)	<b>Impacts Indicator Baseline situation and Date measured:</b> (how the indicator looks when you start, and the date you measured it)
		<b>Ongoing Activities in programme cycle:</b> Total # of sessions      Total # of hours		<b># of Participants in regular Ongoing Activities this year:</b> Age 6-15      Age 16-24      Age 24+		<b>Do participants come from all "sides" of the conflict?</b> M    F    M    F    M    F    YES / NO		<b>Change from Baseline at the end of the year, and Date measured:</b> (how the indicator looks at the end of the programme year, and the date you measured it)	<b>Change from Baseline at the end of the year, and Date measured:</b> (how the indicator looks at the end of the programme year, and the date you measured it)
		<b>(1) Understanding what happened and why:</b> • What worked well and why?  • What didn't work well and why not?  • What evidence is there to show outcomes/ impacts?		<b>(2) Most Significant Changes:</b> • What do people in the Target Group and Beneficiary Community, consider the <b>most important changes</b> over the last year, and why? (note their first response, then prompt to consider personal, relational, structural, cultural dimensions)  • <b>What do they believe caused these changes?</b>  • <b>Why</b> are these changes considered the <b>most important?</b>		<b>(3) Unexpected, unwanted, and unconnected changes:</b> • Were there any <b>unexpected or unintended</b> outcomes/ impacts?  • Have there been any <b>negative</b> outcomes/impact?  • <b>What else was happening</b> that could have caused the changes?		<b>(4) Looking Forward:</b> • Are the changes <b>sustainable?</b> (will the changes be lasting or will things return to the way they were)  • Is the programme <b>cost-effective?</b> (consider time, effort, and resources put in)  • Should this programme be <b>replicated or scaled-up?</b> (should it be continued, or increased in size, or taken to a new place, or not?)	<b>(5) Action Points:</b> • What changes should we make to update our understanding of the <b>Conflict Context?</b>  • What changes should we make to our <b>Theory of Change?</b>  • What changes should we make to our <b>Programme Logic or Activities?</b>  • <i>For Pioneers/Delegates:</i> What changes should we make to improve our <b>indicators</b> and our processes for <b>M&amp;E and Learning?</b>

Figure 2. Generations For Peace, Program Monitoring and Evaluation Grid. From the Generations For Peace Programming Framework, 2013.

In Jordan, the Nashatati (“Our Activities”) Program started as a small pilot in four schools in 2013, but was scaled up over seven years to 1,000 girls’ schools and boys’ schools in partnership with the Ministry of Education and The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF). The program transitioned from after-school activities to in-school activities integrated within the official school curriculum, and scaled by training sixty-one teachers as Master Trainers, forty-two Ministry of Education focal points across the country, and 6,931 teachers to lead activities, ultimately providing the capacity to engage more than 150,000 Jordanian and Syrian refugee students each year in thirty hours of high-quality activities within their school year. Nashatati used GFP’s Sport For Peace approach to foster life skills, active lifestyles, tolerance, acceptance, and social cohesion in communities across Jordan, including those most heavily impacted by the Syrian refugee crisis. Even prior to the Syrian refugee crisis, UNICEF data in Jordan showed decades of serious levels of systemic violence in public schools, with a widespread culture of violence manifesting itself in physical violence as well as psychological, verbal, and structural violence, perpetrated by teachers or students. These persistent issues were further amplified and exacerbated by the Syrian refugee crisis and the mass influx of refugees, the majority of whom were of school age, which put enormous pressures on host communities. The approach proved to be effective in reducing systemic violence in schools, improving educational performance and school attendance, and strengthening resilience and social cohesion, especially



in host communities bearing enormous pressures under the Syrian refugee crisis. The GFP activities helped to transform the engagement and relationship between teachers and students. Among Jordanian and Syrian students, it reduced physical and verbal violence, increased mutual understanding, and enhanced tolerance between the two communities. The program resulted in behavior-change outcomes including a sixty-six percent decrease in youth responding to conflict with physical violence, sixty-three percent of participants expressing increased self-confidence and self-esteem, sixty-three percent of participants reporting improved social cohesion across the participating schools, sixty-one percent of participants reporting improved communication skills helping them in turn to express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions and engage in respectful dialogue, forty-one percent of participants reporting improved problem-solving skills, fifty-one percent of participants reporting increased interaction with peers outside usual everyday social networks, and forty-eight percent of participants reporting improvement in their teamwork skills and generally in attitude toward working in a team.

Ever since its conception in 2007, GFP's focus was predominantly (but not exclusively) on young people and supporting youth leadership to address local issues of conflict and violence in their own communities. Years later, in 2015, following the Global Forum on Youth, Peace and Security, hosted in Amman, Jordan, and the subsequent United Nations Security Council (UNSC) debate chaired by Crown Prince Al Hussein of Jordan (the youngest person ever to have chaired a UNSC session), the UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security. Three years later, in September 2018, the Global Progress Study report back to the UNSC noted the prevalence of "policy panic" and the importance of debunking stereotypes of youth being seen as violent, a problem, or a threat; that efforts must be made to redress "the violence of exclusion" felt by youth, including exclusion from economic participation (youth unemployment in Jordan, for example, was fifty-two percent), political participation, and social and cultural participation; and that young people need to and can show agency, ownership, and leadership in peacebuilding.

I have seen, in communities and societies around the world, youth represent an enormous untapped reservoir of potential, ready to be engaged and supported as partners and leaders in peacebuilding and development. But this opportunity is, too often, being squandered. Too often, youth are instrumentalized, securitized, treated only as economic objects, or seen as a "problem" to be fixed. Too often, government policies and programs set out to do things "to" youth or "for" youth, rather than working "with" youth. Too often, youth are given opportunities to attend trainings and workshops, but without any subsequent programmatic structure to support them afterward to turn what they have learned into effective actions to deliver positive change in their communities. I felt that the inherent and vibrant altruism and energy of youth was being workshopped to death. Following the Arab Spring, for example, I saw that across the Middle East and North Africa so many opportunities were being offered to youth for two- or three-day trainings or workshops in leadership or community projects, without any follow-on programmatic structure to support the application of what they learned and its conversion to meaningful action. I saw how, over time, their hope of receiving such meaningful support to equip them to make positive changes in their communities and society, was gradually being dimmed, and they came to view such opportunities more cynically as a CV-building exercise to help them not to lead change, but rather to find an escape via a scholarship or job abroad. Such tired, traditional approaches seemed to me to be squandered opportunities and a gross failure. The failure fed into political upheavals, violent conflicts, violent crime, and violent extremism.

In contrast, GFP avoided providing a training or workshop in isolation. On GFP's journey, we learned that the best sustainable 'positive peace' impacts for youth empowerment, resilience,

social cohesion, conflict transformation, and reduced vulnerability to violent extremism, come from developing positive values and positive peer-group fusion through experiential learning and activities sustained over time, in existing local structures such as schools, youth centers, and community centers. GFP programs provided training and then ongoing mentoring and support through program design, implementation, and participatory evaluation, giving youth opportunities actually to demonstrate their leadership and responsible citizenship through small local actions in their own communities, and to experience—often for the first time—the feeling of being trusted by adults and authority figures, and appreciated for their contribution to their community. Participatory evaluation focus groups then ensured youth inclusion in local sense-making and local ownership, and provided that moment of intergenerational reflection and dialogue in which elders may share how their perspective has shifted from seeing youth as a problem to seeing their positive potential.

In August 2023, after twelve years serving as CEO, I stepped down from GFP to leave Jordan and return home to Scotland after twenty-two years away, in order to be closer my aging parents and to get my young twin children into school. The move provided me with valuable reflective space to consider what I am returning to, what may I find my new purpose to be, and what I have carried back with me that may be useful to serve that purpose.

I revisited once again an extract from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols: or How To Philosophize with a Hammer*, which I have kept printed and folded in my wallet since I first discovered it at age eighteen:

You run *ahead*?—Are you doing it as a shepherd? Or as an exception? A third case would be the fugitive ... *First* question of conscience.

Are you genuine? Or merely an actor? A representative? Or that which is represented?— In the end, perhaps you are merely a copy of an actor ... *Second* question of conscience.

Are you one who looks on? Or one who lends a hand?— Or one who looks away and walks off? ... *Third* question of conscience.

Do you want to walk along? Or walk ahead? Or walk by yourself? ... One must know *what* one wants and *that* one wants. *Fourth* question of conscience.<sup>16</sup>

To me this has always been an exhortation to have the moral courage to make a conscious, clear choice to step up and lead. Regarding purpose, certainly I feel that my return home to Edinburgh is an opportunity to devote myself to some sort of positive impact in Scotland, in Northern Ireland, and in the UK more widely. I also saw, more clearly visible in the rearview mirror than it had been on the journey, a golden thread woven through my different careers, which was a fascination with leadership and leadership development; with processes of change and transformation in individuals, in organizations, and in communities; and with conflict and how it can be leveraged as source of energy for positive, constructive, generative outcomes, rather than negative, destructive, and degenerative outcomes. I saw a rough sense of progression upstream, from unintended complicity in creating chaos and violence in Iraq, to the reactive emergency humanitarian response work in the DRC, through violence reduction and post-conflict reconciliation in PNG, to grassroots peacebuilding and conflict transformation with GFP in fifty-two countries around the world. I realized I wanted to continue to work my way upstream, to find ways to work at the systems level on prevention and on unleashing squandered potential, to reduce violence, to accelerate public value creation, and to accelerate the energy transition to net zero and nature positive solutions.

However, I worry that in our human systems we do not seem very good at focusing our attention and resources upstream. Our relationship with the past and present seems far more powerful than our relationship with the future. While there are clear moral and economic arguments for much greater investments in upstream prevention, we continually fail really to heed them. For example, the global economic cost of direct violence is enormous. In 2022 the annual economic cost of violence was 17.5 trillion USD, or 12.9 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP). In 2022 global military expenditure rose by 16.8 percent to 7.626 trillion USD. Compare this with total global expenditure on peacebuilding, which in 2022 was just 24 billion USD, i.e., 0.3 percent of military spending.<sup>17</sup> And yet there is robust evidence of a compelling return on investment: that 1 USD spent on ‘upstream’ violence prevention saves 16 USD on ‘downstream’ costs of violent conflict.<sup>18</sup> Why then, do we spend only 24 billion USD on peacebuilding globally, while spending about 40 billion USD on perfume, about 100 billion USD on makeup, and about 119 billion USD on ice cream each year? What does our spending, our resource allocation decisions, say about our values as a society?

I also see the significant cost of conflict within businesses and public services: high staff turnover, absenteeism, sick leave, mental health crises, and toxic work cultures driven by fear and cultural violence. And the same economic argument applies—that upstream prevention is cheaper than cure. Yet how much do businesses invest in leadership development for conflict transformation? For my work recently with the Black Leadership Group in the UK, I looked into the economic cost of racism. The International Monetary Fund calculates that in the United States the wealth gap between white and black people is projected to cost the US economy between 1 and 1.5 trillion USD in lost consumption and investment between 2019 and 2028.<sup>19</sup> That equates to four to six percent of GDP in 2028. In France, reducing racial gaps in access to employment, work hours, and education could secure an economic bonus of 3.6 billion USD over the next twenty years. That equates to 1.5 percent of GDP. In the UK, Route2.com calculations in 2020 showed that ethnic discrimination in the workplace costs the UK 40 billion GBP annually.<sup>20</sup> That equates to 1.8 percent of GDP. In addition, Route2.com’s research to evaluate the economic costs of racial discrimination in the workplace found that persistent experiences of discrimination, racial or otherwise, reduce a person’s well-being, estimating that 19.8 percent of cases of mental health disorders among black, Asian, and minority ethnic persons are attributable to experiences of discrimination in the workplace.

The same argument, that in both blood and treasure, prevention is cheaper than cure, applies not only to violence prevention, but also to public health and to the climate emergency and energy transition to net zero. In each case we seem consistently to fail to make sufficient smart investments in upstream prevention. I am curious about this. Why do we seem really to act only when things have become a crisis, when the impacts are already much more costly? What is it about our psychological relationship with the future compared with the present? What is it about the rhythms of our societies, including democratic election cycles, that constrains the horizon in which we really consider and calculate consequences? What is the role of board level governance and professional advisers, in assessing intergenerational fairness and the risks of inaction?

I founded Transformational Ltd. to be a vehicle to continue to work at this intersection of leadership development, complexity, and conflict, and I see these questions as being at the heart of developing the quality of leadership we want and desperately need in every sector. I believe that transformational positive change for greater intergenerational fairness and more effective use of precious resources seems to require at least the following three things:

- (a) Data that is good quality, timely, relevant, and well-presented visually. This is essential

to reverse the slide toward a post-truth world.

(b) Participatory engagement to connect perspectives of people across the system in generative dialogue, including those most directly impacted and affected.

(c) Accountability and incentive mechanisms to drive the behavior of current leaders.

But a fourth ingredient is also essential, and often seems lacking currently, in my view: courageous leadership. Courageous leadership is needed to transform conflict and also to stand up to the seductive forces that drive attention to the past and present, to focus more attention on the future, and more investment on upstream prevention.

My overall reflection, therefore, is that conflict is normal and exists in every human system, every society, every community, every corporation and organization, and it is precisely conflict that is the arena demanding leadership. Conflict transformation is *the crucial task* of leadership. In our daily work in teams and organizations, that requires us to really think about and work on transforming *inter*-personal conflict, *intra*-group conflict, and *inter*-group conflict. In addition, I would add *intra*-personal conflict—the conflict we have within ourselves and our own self-talk. The key here is that we will not progress *inter*-personal or *inter*-group conflict transformation if we have not first progressed on *intra*-personal and *intra*-group work. And yet I think we see people in so-called leadership positions struggling with conflict, because it is hard. It is hard because it is emotional and requires some vulnerability and risk, and people generally feel unskilled at dealing with the emotions within conflict. This means a lot of leaders are guilty of work avoidance, of side-stepping this emotional labor, and of abdicating this key responsibility of leadership. Courageous leadership is needed, to embrace conflict as a source of energy for positive, constructive, generative development; to resist the seductive drama and hero-leadership of focusing only on present crises; and to focus more investment on upstream prevention.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London and New York: Penguin, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Joint Doctrine Publication, *JDP 0-01, UK Defence Doctrine*, 6th ed. (London: Ministry of Defence, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood's Magazine, 1899).

<sup>4</sup> Thedotgood, "Welcome to the World 200 Top SGOs," 2023, <https://thedotgood.net/ranking/2023-world-200-sgos/>.

<sup>5</sup> Johan Galtung, "Three Approaches to Peace: Peacekeeping, Peacemaking, and Peacebuilding," in *Peace, War and Defense: Essays in Peace Research*, ed. Johan Galtung (Oslo: PRIO, 1975), 297–98.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Mark Clark, "Demystifying Theory and Remystifying Practice: Theoretical Frames for Better Practice of Sport-Based Approaches to Conflict Transformation" (master's thesis, HEC Paris, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> For an explanation of "wicked" and "tame" problems, see Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (June 1973): 155–69.

<sup>9</sup> Leon de Caluwé and Hans Vermaak, *Learning to Change: A Guide for Organization Change Agents* (London: Sage, 2003); and "Change Paradigms: An Overview," *Organization Development Journal* 22, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 9–18.

<sup>10</sup> Clark, "Demystifying Theory."

<sup>11</sup> Clark, "Demystifying Theory."

<sup>12</sup> Clark, "Demystifying Theory."

<sup>13</sup> John P. Kotter and Dan S. Cohen, *The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön, *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

<sup>15</sup> Sairah Yusuf and Suna J. Voss, *The Generations For Peace Institute Compendium of Participatory Indicators of Peace* (Amman: Generations For Peace Institute, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 36–37.

<sup>17</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Peace Index 2023* (Sydney: Vision of Humanity, 2023).

<sup>18</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, *Measuring Peacebuilding Cost-Effectiveness* (Sydney: Vision of Humanity, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Losavio, “*What Racism Costs Us All*,” International Monetary Fund, September 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2020/09/the-economic-cost-of-racism-losavio>.

<sup>20</sup> “Workplace Discrimination: The Cost,” Route2, July 27, 2020, <https://route2.com/workplace-discrimination-the-cost/>.