

The Forum for Cities in Transition: A City to City Approach to Conflict Recovery and Reconciliation

Padraig O'Malley and Nancy Riordan

The underlying unifying principles of the Forum for Cities in Transition¹ propose:

Cities that are in transition in countries divided by conflict are in the best position to help other cities in transition in other such countries; that people from divided societies are in the best position to help people in other divided societies; that divided cities collectively can do together what they cannot do separately in a reciprocal process serving their sister cities, where those further along in transition are sharply reminded of where they once were, where they are now, and where they hope to go in continuing their own processes of transition, recovery and reconciliation.

Cities in political conflict or its aftermath and those that are divided by issues of race, ethnicity, religion, and political ideology share many common problems and past/present experiences in difficult and often very different circumstances. They face the life-and-death problems of conflict and war and at the same time the challenge of meeting the practical basic needs of their citizens. But such cities continue to function even in extraordinary circumstances. Each finds its own particular way of adapting to the exigencies of everyday life with the threat of imminent, explosive divisions hanging over them. Normalcy overlays what is essentially abnormal.

Cities have common problems ranging from policing, garbage collection, housing, road construction, the provision of health and welfare services, to identifying flashpoints and interfaces that trigger violence and having in place mechanisms to control and contain such outbreaks. Each city is at a different stage of transition. Nevertheless, through the process of sharing their narratives they can learn from each other and create a dynamic that becomes a catalyst for change.

Background

Since WW II, most wars have been intrastate wars, wars within a country where one or more groups have fought others who control the levers of power, either to overthrow them and establish their own hegemony or to force them into some governance arrangement under which, they, the out-groups would have a share of power or even equal power. The distribution of that power would be reflected not only in the new forms of government agreed on, but in all sectors of society in terms of allocation of resources, redressing imbalances of the past, providing equality under the law, equal opportunity for employment, abolition of past discriminatory practices, recognition of cultural parity, and in some cases where the out-groups professed allegiance to a different national identity, giving parity of recognition to all identities. Invariably, these conflicts involved issues of religion, ethnicity, race, culture, language and national identity.

Countries in which this occurs are labelled ‘divided societies’.

Among some of the countries torn apart by cleavages that have resulted in widespread and indiscriminate violence, as different factions sought to advance their claims by forming paramilitary organizations (or the armed forces of a neighboring county proclaiming the right to protect an ethnically related minority) are Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Lebanon, South Africa, the Balkans (when Yugoslavia imploded after the collapse of Communism), Iraq (where the Kurds carved out their own enclave, Kurdistan, under American protection after the first Gulf War), and Nigeria.

In most of these countries, violence has now ceased or been brought to manageable levels and forms of governance have been adopted that sufficiently address the out-groups’ grievances (thus ensuring their participation in government), paramilitary groups have either disbanded or gone silent and in some cases (most notably Northern Ireland), a process called ‘decommissioning of arms’ has culminated in the verifiable destruction of most paramilitary arms caches.

Each of these societies is in a different stage of transition to ‘normalcy’, although it might be better to think of them as societies in ‘recovery’, because if they do not continually address the causes of the conflict, if the grievances of war remain unaddressed or inadequately addressed, if processes to nurture reconciliation are not promoted (especially at the community level), if disparities in wealth and income continue to grow among competing groups despite legislation aimed at closing such gaps, if an agreed history of the past cannot be reconciled, if the root causes of what resulted in the conflict cannot

be acknowledged by all, then the residual causes of conflict and perceived grievances linger and fester, risking slow accumulation to a critical mass that sees the outbreak of conflict again. Thus, there is a need to put in place mechanisms that minimize this risk.

The premise that underlies the Forum for Cities in Transition: *people from divided societies are in the best position to help people in other divided societies*; that former protagonists, often former purveyors of violence and death who abandoned violence to resolve their differences, are best equipped to share their often tentative and difficult journeys to recognizing the necessity to abandon violence as the instrument to achieve their political aims and open the gateways to recovery, reconstruction, and reconciliation; *that peoples from divided societies share behavioral, political, social, and psychological traits, not seen in people in more 'normal' societies that have not experienced such violence firsthand, traits that predispose them to see things through a prism that is different than the prism through which you and I would perceive the same events.*

Among them:

- Uniqueness: beliefs that 'our' conflict is 'special'.
- "We all used to live peacefully together before this."
- "There has never been a conflict like ours."
- "No one but us can ever understand it."
- Minority/majority dichotomies: either a majority holds all the instruments of power and is unwilling to share with a "different" minority, a minority that does not share a similar religion/nationality/ethnicity/culture/race/language etc.
- 'Othering' — to deny attributes or characteristics generally shared by human beings in order to suggest that the individual or group is another kind, an 'other'.
- More than/less than syndrome; the belief that no matter what change is made or formula is put forward to lessen divisions, inbred psychological predispositions trigger thinking on the part of one group that any change will always benefit the other party to the conflict and leave it worse off. 'The narcissism of small differences' — the more objectively alike opposing groups are, the more they magnify their pseudo-differences.
- Zero sum analytical perspectives: if you appear to win, even if there is no overt evidence of it, I *must* be losing.
- A recurring dynamic: doing the same things over and over again and expecting a different outcome; i.e., believing no matter what happens that, 'we are going to win'; repeating acts of violence and expecting a different result.

- Holding tight to perceived grievances/resentments, and being unable to let go.
- Kin is everything i.e., close communal and family ties.
- Never letting go of the past; “Never! No surrender! Not an inch!”
- Every side sees events through different perceptual prisms.
- Every side has different historical starting points, narratives, and interpretations of the same events.
- Any small incident can escalate into a major eruption; a killing, even an accidental one, can result in widespread violence.
- Anything can become the spark that suddenly awakens dormant grievances or ignites festering grievances.

This thesis does not suggest that all intrastate or conflicts in divided societies are the same; it does posit, however, that there are sufficient points of possible identification — a convergence in the behaviors of groups that engage in such conflicts — to merit examination. There is much to be gained by everyone: groups from the countries who hear the narratives of conflict and emergence from conflict, shakily in some, more firmly rooted in others, and the groups from narrating countries.

All gain from such interactions, but especially those groups who are still in conflict, who have reached a point where they are searching for a way out of what has seemed to them an intractable conflict. The fact that groups now in transition to shared governance would describe their conflicts as once appearing to be intractable to groups still convinced that theirs are intractable creates bonding between the two in ways not quite explicable to societies that never had to undergo similar experiences. While divided societies may indeed be dissimilar, they are quite the same in many respects.

The Forum for Cities in Transition (FCT) is premised on a similarly based thesis. Just as divided societies are in the best position to assist other divided societies in a way more ‘normal’ societies or international institutions can’t, thus cities that are or were at the epicenter of the conflicts in their countries are in a special position to assist each other because they, too, harbor the same behavioural characteristics. They are also divided along racial, ethnic, nationalist, religious, cultural, or linguistic lines with enclaves of different populations groups ‘guarded’ by their indigenous militias or serving as the breeding ground for militias that launch attacks on members of other enclaves. They are often the micro-representation of their society’s fault lines, the focus of forms of ‘ethnic cleansing’, that is, violence that ensures that within an enclave, the minority belonging to the ‘other’ who do not share the majority’s

political dispositions, are methodically targeted for murder or driven by fear from their homes.

Cities are compact, and in the period before some spark became the transformative agent of violence, places where it was not unusual for members of both out-groups and in-groups to live as minorities in each other's enclaves. Nevertheless, the onset of conflict invariably becomes an instrument of 'othering'. The next door neighbor is no longer a neighbor with whom you had shared many ordinary day-to-day living experiences, but an 'enemy', someone to be expelled as a threat to security or suddenly 'different'.

Concepts of humanness are malleable; they transmute with perceived threat. Retaliation killings become routine; kidnapping and disappearances random, torture often precedes murder, mutilation often follows; the compulsion to dehumanize the 'other' becomes pervasive; cemeteries are transformed into recruitment centers for mobilizing against the other.

Cities become citadels of danger. The state's security forces are predominantly based in cities. Governments are invariably on the side of the in-groups, their armoury is directed at the enclaves of the out-groups, ostensibly at their militias, but indiscriminately enough to ensure that civilians are those mainly affected. Militias target each other's populations but rarely each other. Cities witness carnage and mayhem in disproportionate measure. Members of one group never enter the territory of the other; as the layers of perceived responsibility are unfolded with each group accusing the other. Members of all groups become increasingly sensitive to the idiosyncrasies and subtle variations in gesture, pitch of voice or laughter — variations entirely imperceptible to an outsider — that appear to distinguish them but become instead tools in their survival kits. The 'mixed' areas that remain after population movements (either to the safer haven of their own communities, displacement, or abandonment) and areas where enclaves that abut each other become the interstices that continue to remind all groups that sometimes raw emotions, often expressed in hideous ways, obfuscate the causes of the conflict itself.

Checkpoints become normal; intricate patterns of movement and transportation are deployed in whatever remains of central business areas; stores check handbags and briefcases; body checks are normal and parking is prohibited. Arbitrary detention without trial becomes standard judicial practice; security forces close off streets as they go door-to-door searching houses for weapons, aggravating grievances into rage and rage into closer relationships with and support of paramilitaries. Demonstrations within boundaries of secure enclaves evolve into outlets for the expression of fear, paranoia, and

regurgitation of alleged atrocities against members of their group in other enclaves; memory becomes the repository for as much that is false as is true; people pray for peace but rarely condemn the violence of their own.

This sweeping panorama of cities that are the centrifuges of the larger conflict that engulfs them is painted on a broad canvas with careful strokes, artfully depicting the neighborhoods and streets where maximum destruction can be accomplished, targets are easiest to find, clandestine connections made, and youth recruited to paramilitary structures; where informants are most productive and infiltration easier; where poverty is most acute and class differences most glaring, pitting the working class of the in-group against that of the out-group, the former asserting its marginal advantage through its affinity with the in-group and willing to fight and kill and be killed to preserve this perceived superiority.

And, of course, cities are most often the places in which the media (local, national and international) can converge; they usually have some or all of the infrastructure the media needs: hotels, Internet, fax machines, land lines and cell phones, drivers for hire — all the paraphernalia that the television requires to record the footage that maintains viewers' interest in the conflict. Interest, however, is predicated on footage of gruesome violence: refugees fleeing their homes, abandoning their possessions, frightened children and raped women. The electronic media, by the act of recording, alter the *form* of the events they cover and thus the *content* of what they transmit. In-groups, out-groups and their affiliated military arms become extremely adept at using the media to advance their agendas.

Founding the Forum for Cities in Transition

In April 2009, five cities — Derry-Londonderry, Belfast, Nicosia (Greek Cypriot community and Turkish Cypriot community), Kirkuk and Mitrovicë/Kosovska Mitrovica — were invited to a conference at the University of Massachusetts Boston, hosted by the Moakley Chair of Peace and Reconciliation. The purpose of the conference was to have the cities explore, after listening to the narratives of each other's conflict, whether they had sufficient common attributes, experiences and collective identification that they should form a collaborative where they would share their differences and similarities in a more formal and ongoing way, in the hope that learning from each other would strengthen the social/political fabric of their respective cities. They drew up a founding document, '*A Call to Action*'², and became the founding cities of the Forum for Cities in Transition.

These founding cities had experienced many of the characteristics described above — human toll, burnt or bombed out neighborhoods, devastated housing damage, destruction of infrastructure, demographic reconfigurations, proliferation of militias, laboratory-like experiments by the security forces to control the flow of people and vehicles, entry to, passage through and exit of particular areas, policing that is abhorrent to out-groups, and the gross violation of human rights, etc.

But even at the depth of their conflicts, these cities managed to provide a modicum of basic services; although in some, adequate services had never been available to members of the out groups. But the sense of territorial entrapment can also generate a concomitant sense of communal pride – unwillingness on the part of groups to let things fall apart in their own communities and a pride that sustains loss. Thus, perceptions of poverty, access to amenities such as electricity and drinking water, and water itself, schooling, housing, health, transportation, and most important, perceptions of policing – unwelcome intrusions to one group, welcome presence to the other – are seen through different prisms that refract the distortions of how people cope with war rather than reflecting the metrics of relative deprivation.

Our concern is with the city of the ‘other’, especially with the ‘othering’ that is pervasive in the societies of which these cities are part – the cities that are at the epicenter of divided societies, the cities that define and epitomize the nature of the societal divisions and cleavages that are the pervasive and permanent characteristics of some nation states or regions. These are the cities of the ‘old’ terrorisms.

The cities invited to the Boston conference shared a set of internal and external characteristics. The internal characteristics related to the routes they took to arrive at internal power-sharing or consensual governance protocols; the external characteristics related to members of some groups professing different loyalties, oppositional senses of belonging and affirmations of antithetical identities. Some cities are situated in a country within the territorial boundaries of the state specific to one group, and some straddle the boundaries of nation states where the boundaries themselves are the issue.

Thus in Derry-Londonderry — referred to many residents as simply Stroke City — perhaps up to 70 percent of the population, who regard themselves as being Irish, aspire to becoming part of a united Ireland, and the 30 percent who regard themselves as being British want to remain part of the United Kingdom.

In Belfast, a similar division pertains, although the percentages are probably 50/50.

In Mitrovica, the declaration of independence by Kosovo in February 2008 that was recognized by the United States and the European Union but not by the United Nations, was not recognized by Serbia or the UN and was vehemently rejected by Serbs on the northern side of the Ibar River. Here, Serbs maintain allegiance to the Serbian government in Belgrade. Serbia does not accept the partition of Serbia that created the state of Kosovo. Kosovo Albanians on the southern bank of the Ibar River (Mitrovicë) recognize the Kosovar government in Pristina and the Kosovo government regards the northern municipality of Kosovska Mitrovica as illegitimate: Mitrovica on the north side of the Ibar River is claimed as part of the Kosovo state.

In Kirkuk, Kurds want Kirkuk to become part of Kurdistan, an autonomous region of Iraq, while Turkmen, Arabs, and Assyrians strenuously object to such an arrangement. They want to remain under the control of the central government in Baghdad, to remain in 'Arab' Iraq. A referendum that supposedly would have resolved the issue should have taken place by 31 December 2007 but was postponed until it can be determined who is a legitimate resident of Kirkuk. Since Saddam's ousting some 400,000 Kurds have made their way to Kirkuk. Many have legitimate claims on properties. Some don't. Determining which Kurds are legitimate residents of Kirkuk is a matter on which Arabs and Turkmen will give little ground to the Kurds.

In Nicosia, the two-thirds of the population who are Greek Cypriots generally want the unification of the Island into a federal state emphasizing the unity and continuity of the state. The Republic of Cyprus is a member of the EU. Its boundaries encompass the whole of the island of Cyprus. The one-third of the population that is Turkish Cypriot generally prefers a loose federal system within a new state and a closer relationship to Turkey. The self-acclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is only recognized by Turkey and otherwise has no international legal standing. Nicosia is divided: Greek Cypriots on one side of the UN buffer zone; Turkish Cypriots on the other. To enter the Turkish Cypriot sector of Nicosia, one has to go through the buffer zone and police controls at the Turkish boundary.

In three — Kirkuk, Nicosia, and Mitrovica — there are property rights issues: in each, population movements took place as groups sought the refuge of their own, and moved to secure enclaves, leaving behind their homes and possessions. These movements flowed in both directions.

In Mitrovica, Serbs live in properties to which Kosovars have legal title, and Kosovars live in properties to which Serbs have legal claim; and in Kirkuk, as part of his policy to bring the Kurds under his dominion, Saddam Hussein removed tens of thousands of Kurds from Kirkuk, dispersed them throughout the rest of Iraq, and moved Sunni Arabs into their homes. The Iraqi government is now trying to placate returning Kurds who want to live in their old homes. Arabs in possession of these properties refuse to simply hand them over.

Derry-Londonderry has undergone a different kind of migration. Almost all the Protestants (in favour of continuing the union with Britain) who once lived in Cityside (which has a predominance of Catholic residents) have left, reducing their presence to the mere hundreds.

In three cities, rivers are natural dividers. In Mitrovica, Serbs on the northern side of the Ibar, Kosovars on the southern side; in Derry-Londonderry, Catholics on the western side of the Foyle, Protestants in the Waterside on the eastern side; in Belfast Catholics on the western side of the Lagan, Protestants on the eastern side.

The centrepiece of the Forum's activities is an annual conference where each city, in turn, invites its sister cities to a conference on its home turf. Such conferences include municipal representatives, NGOs that have earned the trust of the political players over the years, grassroots community organizations, and academic institutions from across the divides, to engage in a process that exposes them to each other through sharing their respective narratives of conflict and post conflict transitions.

The aim of these conferences is not to provide an opportunity to talk shop. These conferences are action oriented and member cities are required to pledge to undertake tangible 'projects' which are to be completed before meeting the following year. In addition, the forum engages *practitioners* with the on-the-ground experiences of delivery of basic services that are efficient, encompass the entire municipality, are equitable in the sense that one community does not feel that it is getting less than a fair share of the city's resources, they explore how relationships are negotiated and maintained between and among communities, how to set standards of transparency that will increase their populations trust in their efficacy, and undertake 'city projects', collectively or individually, which the participating cities will design during the conference with the specific requirement of having them completed before the following year's host conference. The cities themselves will act as monitors of these projects, and if possibilities present themselves, cities can engage in joint projects or collective ones.

It is the hope of the FCT, that cities attending the conferences will learn from each other and create among themselves the dynamics that become a catalyst for change, that by sharing the travails of sorting out complex, intricate, and very complicated problems at the local level, from the grass roots up, rather than the other way around, they will discover and test new ways of dealing with old problems, that their collective voices can gain them access to international and national donor meetings in order to impress upon them that the collectivity of the cities' engagement transcends individual needs, that they are all looking out for each other means that increasing prosperity in one becomes the lynchpin for increasing prosperity in all.

Sharing the experiences of 'on-the-ground' engagements will expose participants to ways of dealing with similar, although different problems, the specific details of which will create an expanding pool of knowledge and support from which all can draw.

The Inaugural FCT Conference: Mitrovicë/Kosovska Mitrovica

Mitrovicë/Kosovska Mitrovica hosted the inaugural conference of the Forum for Cities in May 2010. It was their conference, a reflection of how the two communities, Albanian and Serb were able to rise above the differences that provide the context for their conflict and create a vibrant program that opened to participating cities the day-to-day experiences of Mitrovicans on both sides of the River Ibar; of how they had found ways to transcend the multiple issues that drive division — the solutions to which are in the hands of their respective governments and the international community, whereas the failure to resolve these issues continues to have a direct impact on their daily lives — of how they were engaging in collaborative projects for the good of all Mitrovicians. In the end, no matter how their conflict is resolved, they are the people who have to live with its consequences.

Nine cities sent around 50 delegates, representative of the communities with deep cleavages among them in their own cities. These included the founding cities – Derry-Londonderry, Belfast, Nicosia (Greek and Turkish Cypriots), Kirkuk, and host Mitrovica. Guest cities included Mostar, Beirut, Jerusalem and Haifa. Kaduna was to attend but had to withdraw after the President of Nigeria died, precipitating a constitutional crisis in the province, but it remained committed. A further dozen 'international experts' also attended. The program was designed to encourage intensive interaction among all. It included site visits (North and South), including visits to schools, breakaway sessions to discuss these experiences, followed by plenaries presided over by international panels and locals to discuss the four issues of most concern to Mitrovicans - municipal

services, property claims and the right to return, building an acceptable community based police force, and a presentation of Mitrovica's business model; sessions that allowed every city to share the narratives of each other's conflict; city project workshops where each city was required to design a project it would complete before the next conference; and a final plenary where cities presented their projects but more importantly projects specifically designed to help Mitrovica.

The 2nd Annual FCT Conference: Derry-Londonderry

Derry-Londonderry hosted the 2nd inaugural conference of the Forum for Cities in May 2011. Thirteen cities participated: Belfast, Beirut, Kirkuk, Kaduna, Nicosia, Jerusalem, Haifa, Mitte, Mitrovicë/Kosovska Mitrovica, Mostar, Nicosia, Ramallah and Derry-Londonderry itself.

It, too, was their conference, a reflection of how the two communities, Waterside/Cityside, Protestant and Catholic, Unionist and Nationalist were able to rise above their own divisions to showcase the Northern Irish Peace Process, discuss best practice for economic development, mental health issues, among others and, drawing on the feedback from the cities who attended the Mitrovica conference, providing the space for more intensive interaction among delegates, further encouraging a sense of shared purpose and bringing them closer to an understanding that together they could empower each other, but for that to happen, they would have to communicate more effectively between conferences via the FCT's interactive website and work together to bring their commitments to fruition.

In accordance with the mission statement of the FCT, the emphasis of the Derry-Londonderry 2011 conference was also on the realization of practical outcomes that would assist participating cities improve the daily lives of their citizens, and enhance engagement between officials, NGOs, and residents.

As a result of the extensive one to one networking, bilateral and multilateral deliberations that took place among city delegations during the Derry-Londonderry conference, both in formal and informal sessions, over 20 projects were pledged as the outcomes of the 2011 forum.

Finally, a founding FCT city, Kirkuk, Iraq announced it will host the next conference. This conference will take place in October 2012.

An Ongoing Outcomes Based Process

The Forum for Cities in Transition (FCT) is not conference hosting per se but an extension of the meeting convened the previous year. This is an ongoing process explicitly grounded in there being tangible outcomes at the close of each conference, a commitment made by each city to carrying out a project that will further transition, recovery, reconciliation, and development in its own city or to help one of its sister cities where its expertise in a particular area can be of significant benefit. Commitments are designed so that cities on the higher rungs of transition assist those on the lower rungs. They are embodied in the principle that divided cities collectively can do together what they cannot do separately.

The process is reciprocal because in serving their sister cities, those further along in transition are sharply reminded of where they once were, where they are now, and where they hope to go in continuing their own processes of transition and reconciliation.

Notes

- 1 The Forum for Cities in Transition is an initiative of the John Joseph Moakley Chair of Peace and Reconciliation at the University of Massachusetts Boston. The Secretariat is shared by the Northern Ireland Foundation, Belfast and the Moakley Chair. The purpose of the Secretariat is to provide and carry out the administrative tasks associated with conferences of increasing magnitude and to provide assistance to the cities or the committee organizing a conference on behalf of the host city)

The ownership of the Forum belongs to the cities themselves and they collectively are the decision makers.

The Forum's web site is www.citiesintransition.net

- 2 The 'Call to Action': signatories affirmed their commitment to promoting understanding between member cities with the aim of encouraging mutual learning, dialogue, and the resolution of conflict through non-violent methods. Even though they face different problems, challenges, and contexts, cities in transition can both learn from, and offer lessons to, each other; that this learning should be shared, so that cities in transition can use resources and knowledge of others to address their own challenges.