Antti Pentikäinen is a Research Professor at the George Mason University School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution (S-CAR) and the Director of the Mary Hoch Center for Reconciliation. Through S-CAR, Antti is advising the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) on reconciliation process design. He joined S-CAR after establishing the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers with the UN (2015-2019). Prior to this, he served as the Special Envoy for Finland’s prime minister on the Refugee Crisis (2015-2019) as well as Advisor for the UN Special Advisor to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide (2017). For over a decade, Antti led the efforts of Finn Church Aid (2004-2015) as its Executive Director, and assumed several leadership positions including as special advisor to President Ahtisaari and Director at Crisis Management Initiative (2000-2004) and Religions for Peace (2010-2011). He has peace and reconciliation experience from diverse contexts, including Somalia, South Sudan and Libya, and is focused on understanding the roles of insider reconcilers, connecting better community-level efforts with state-level political processes and developing support mechanisms for effective reconciliation processes.
Insider reconcilers
Dialogue for sustaining peace
By Antti Pentikäinen

Learning from the failing reconciliation process in Northern Ireland
For many, the murder of award-winning journalist, Lyra McKee, by a group called the New Irish Republican Army (IRA), was a wake-up call. The assassination took place in April 2019, but the signs had been there all along. Lyra’s last story had been about the increase of suicide rates among young people after the 1988 Good Friday Agreement. Her friend said: ‘Once she got hold of something she really didn’t give up.’ Lyra had found the dark side of the failing reconciliation process in Northern Ireland, and this eventually took her life as well.

Earlier, on 19 January 2019, a car bomb had exploded in Derry leading to the arrest of four men belonging to the same dissident republican group, the New IRA. Ireland’s Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney, immediately suggested that the attack was an attempt to drag Northern Ireland back into violence and conflict. Within the context of Brexit, it was becoming apparent that despite the 1988 Good Friday Agreement, EU integration and a period of unprecedented wealth, the country was not succeeding in sustaining peace. Twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland remained a deeply divided society in many aspects of daily existence, including education and housing. Recent efforts to build so called peace walls, lack of further progress with desegregated schools and the suspension of the collaborative government suggest that the reconciliation process in Northern Ireland is currently facing significant challenges. These events reveal in part the complexity and urgency of improving the effectiveness of reconciliation processes and sustaining the impact of community-based dialogue.

Northern Ireland has been referred to as an example of how peaceful co-existence is possible and sufficient in preventing future cycles of
violence without addressing past atrocities. Steven Sampson even argued that leaving past grievances unaddressed would be a better route to peace and coexistence than relying on mechanisms of truth-telling and justice that may not be reliable or available.

However, statistics reveal that violence continued although it moved into more private spaces. During the first ten years after the Good Friday Agreement 272 people, primarily youth, were shot and 523 otherwise assaulted in ‘paramilitary style’ attacks. At the same time, suicide rates show an increase after the Agreement. Unreconciled conflict re-emerged also in the form of violence against women. The number of reported domestic abuse incidents in Northern Ireland increased nearly every year from 2004 to 2016, underscoring again the necessity to address conflict-related trauma, intergenerational pain and re-emerging cycles of conflict.

Two prominent scholars, Brandon Hamber and Gráinne Kelly, conducted extensive research on the process. They found that the disconnect between grassroots efforts and the political process affects the impact of reconciliation processes: ‘although there has been significant work done at a community level, and a number of reconciliation-orientated policies have been put in place at the political level, these have often operated on different tracks.’ Some of the world’s best practitioners had developed and led community-based reconciliation efforts and significant financial contributions had been made by the UK and the EU, but this was not enough to prevent the re-emergence of violence. This has even led to criticism of the overall concept of reconciliation.

Hamber and Kelly proposed that the reluctance of political leadership to adequately address the past and the segregation of communities were the main reasons for the failing reconciliation. In their view, the political leadership in Northern Ireland ‘failed to fully champion a cross-community vision for a reconciled society…and [therefore] the new stressors such as Brexit and the questions it raises for the Irish Border and the peace process more broadly, it appears that this limited approach is inadequate. The inability to transform the underlying social and political divisions in society and the ongoing reluctance to address the past in a holistic way, continually undermine progress’. Political leadership in Northern Ireland, as well as within the British and Irish governments, therefore opted for ‘peace without reconciliation’, which means that power-sharing arrangements between Unionists and Nationalists were continuously prioritised over reconciliation.
Also Hamber and Kelly recognised that despite their efforts to create a new working model, fundamental questions on how to make reconciliation more effective remained unresolved. Their observations on the interconnectedness of national policies and community-based action are helpful when striving to design more effective reconciliation processes, recognising that reliance on political will remains a challenge. Elite resistance usually grows over time, which underscores the importance of seizing historical opportunities, such as the Good Friday Agreement, to launch multi-track reconciliation processes, paying careful attention to reconciliation process design, and ensuring that national policies are supported with complementary efforts to heal community relations and address personal trauma.

Dialogue at grassroots level is a necessary part of reconciliation
Hamber and Kelly developed a working definition of reconciliation with the intention to enable other societies to build on the experiences of Northern Ireland when designing reconciliation processes. That working definition rests on the assumption that building peace requires sustained attention, suggesting five interconnected strands of activity to reconcile broken relationships and to address underlying grievances. These include:
1) developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society,
2) acknowledging and dealing with the past,
3) building positive relationships,
4) supporting significant cultural and attitudinal change, and
5) implementing substantial social, economic and political change.

Divided communities have complex grievances, which no outsider can fully understand or resolve. Effective reconciliation must include community-based dialogue on the root causes and jointly-developed resolutions that address past grievances. These dialogue efforts are closely linked to other community-based peacebuilding efforts, including reconciliation practices such as restorative peace circles and storytelling and are typically best led by individuals from within these communities.

In Finland, the government and the indigenous Sámi people agreed to complement the work of a proposed Truth and Reconciliation Commission with support for insider reconcilers. The author and a prominent Sámi activist Anne Nuorgam, who later became chairperson of the UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous People, developed an academic training course for these insider reconcilers. After basic
Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams (right) holds a copy of the Good Friday agreement with Martin McGuinness (left) as they speak to journalists in the Stormont parliament building in Belfast, October 14, 2002.

Photo: Darren Staple, Adobe Stock Images/Reuters
training on peacebuilding and reconciliation, participants apply these methods in their own cases, aiming to resolve underlying grievances. Using reconciliation practices and dialogue, parties were introduced to the process and brought closer together in a search for practical solutions. After solutions were formulated, reconciliation practices continued to be used to invite broader communities into the process. The first cohort of insider reconcilers called for continued support and suggested the government of Finland establish a Center for Indigenous Reconciliation Knowledge (CIRKLE) on Sámi Land. Implementation is still pending and has been hindered by disagreements on several legal issues and a deep sense of distrust by the Sámi towards the state.

In addition to providing support for insider reconcilers, Sámi experts on psychosocial support were asked to develop a programme to address intergenerational trauma. Their key recommendations included using a collection of culturally-sensitive healing practices and permanently improving capacity for psychosocial support in Sámi Land. Insider reconcilers in the Sámi context also viewed healing practices as an essential part of their efforts and benefitted from basic training on restorative justice, peace circles and the ‘Healing of the Memories’ methodology.

Several experts have promoted integrating healing practices into the reconciliation process, including Olga Botcharova who highlighted the necessity of addressing personal trauma in preventing the cycle of aggression and revenge based on her experience of grassroots reconciliation in the Balkans. In her view, acute trauma, often linked to fear, anger and feelings of betrayal, can lead to segregation based on identity, disrupt community relations, promote resentment and increase the risk of renewed violence. Botcharova’s model does not, however, include the necessity for dialogue as continuation in the path for reconciliation.

Practical experiences suggest that a combination of the Hamber and Kelly model and Botcharova’s approach is very effective. The figure on the next page visualises the factors that perpetuate cycles of identity conflict and suggests a series of reconciliation practices to support a path towards reconciliation. This includes space for dialogue that allows individuals and communities to share their experiences and ideas for resolving root causes and practical grievances, which helps further to transform relationships and generate a shared vision of a peaceful future. The figure illustrates how dialogue is an important part of insider reconcilers’ efforts but suggests that it can be more effective after
The land of the Sámi, called Sápmi, stretches over northern Scandinavia all the way over to the Kola Peninsula.

Photo: Adobe Stock Images
applying trauma-healing practices. In addition, it highlights that dialogue has to be coupled with reforms and efforts that address the need for justice. Restorative justice and practices of apology and forgiveness can complement the process when found appropriate by the involved communities (especially victims). Without dialogue and reform, root causes of conflicts are likely to remain, and communities’ perceptions of each other may not change.

**Figure 1: Cycle of revenge and path towards reconciliation**
Insider reconcilers can help to improve impact of reconciliation and sustain peace

Approximately 50% of all peace processes currently fail during the first five years. Learning how to better support reconciliation is essential for communities and states but also for the United Nations (UN) in its efforts to sustain peace. Of United Nations Security Council mandated missions, 75% aim for some form of reconciliation, but little substantive guidance has been given on how to achieve this.

Insider mediators have been recognised as essential actors in peace processes, both in theory and in practice, for decades. Surprisingly, a similar approach has rarely been applied in reconciliation processes even though the transformation of community relations requires the involvement and leadership of insiders within these communities. Identification and involvement of relevant insider reconcilers can help to collect best practices and to design effective processes, strengthening the complementarity between grassroots reconciliation efforts and state-based processes. Such reconciliation process design can be essential in seizing often rare historical opportunities to end cycles of violence.

Effective reconciliation process design could benefit from a similar multi-track approach as traditional peace mediation. In such processes state level commissions (Track I) searching for truth and justice would be complemented with community-level dialogue and peacebuilding efforts (Track II) led by insider reconcilers on root causes and resolving practically underlying grievances. These efforts would be combined and complemented with opportunities for individual and community-based healing (Track III), improving likelihood of ending the cycles of conflict and sustaining peace.

Insider mediators and reconcilers are, however, often vulnerable and can be scapegoated, threatened and even killed amidst violent conflicts. Therefore, involvement of insider reconcilers has to be developed with appropriate support mechanisms. Even in peaceful environments, facing mistrust, hatred and the trauma of past atrocities is exhausting. Counselling, peer support and spaces for rest and planning are therefore essential as part of these support structures. Insider reconcilers should also be supported by a community of international reconciliation practitioners. Together they can help states and communities in planning and designing reconciliation processes that are likely to have a lasting impact on their communities, to improve relationships within them and to build an interdependent future.
Endnotes


2 Refers to suspension of Stormont devolved government.


7 Mental Health Foundation, ‘Mental Health in Northern Ireland’, 2016.


12 Mark Salter and Zahbia Yousuf (ed.), ‘Transforming broken relationships: Making peace with the past’, Accord Insight 3, 2016, p 16

13 Kofi Annan Foundation and Interpeace, (see endnote 9).


15 Kofi Annan Foundation and Interpeace, (see endnote 9), p. 108.

16 The author was Independent Advisor for the Government of Finland and the Sámi indigenous people on initiating and designing the Truth and Reconciliation Process. Negotiations on the mandate of the Commission were still pending while this article was published. An account on these efforts is published (currently only) in Finnish at:

17 ‘The fate of the Sámis reveal the depth and multidimensional nature of social and personal traumatic experiences involved in inter-generational pain. This means extreme losses by Sámi communities and individuals resulting in experiences of helplessness, persecution and illness caused by another group or identity and humiliations caused by this other group or nation. These experiences are passed from one generation to the other until a generation becomes able to face and process these inter-generational traumatic experiences. As a result each generation, conscious and unconscious, defines their identity through these traumas and passes on their wounded identity that was already pierced by the traumatic experiences of the previous generations’. (Psychotherapist Pirkko Siltala, 2016).

18 http://healingthroughremembering.org/

19 Olga Botcharova, 2002, Seven Steps Towards Reconciliation.


22 UN Mission mandates can be seen here. The estimate is by author:
https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/reports-security-council-missions