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Peace education in conflict zones – experience from northern Sri Lanka

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In September 2005, adult students from Kilinochchi, located in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)-controlled Wanni region of northern Sri Lanka, were awarded University of Bradford, UK, validated postgraduate certificates or diplomas in conflict resolution and peace preparedness. The diploma is, we think, a landmark in peace education when an internationally recognised higher educational course on peace and conflict resolution has been conducted in an area under the de facto authority of a militant separatist group with their full knowledge, cooperation and participation. We argue that in conflict or post-conflict situations, formal tertiary-level peace education programmes are important. This is because they provide local stakeholders with a safe educational space – one in which they can engage and experiment with the discourse of peace without overtly political implications. Such programmes also help develop peace-building capacity by offering people the necessary knowledge with which to analyse and think about the causes, management, resolution and transformation of violent conflict in a depoliticised, safe and educationally rewarding context.

Keywords: Sri Lanka; adult peace education; conflict zones

Introduction

In 2003 the peace studies programme in Colombo, in collaboration with the Department of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford, UK, conducted the first tertiary-level diploma course specifically focused on peace to be offered in Sri Lanka. The initial development of this course coincided with the signing of a ceasefire agreement in February 2002 between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the government of Sri Lanka, a process facilitated by the Norwegian government. This cessation of hostilities offered renewed hope to the people of Sri Lanka who had suffered a protracted and violent conflict for more than 20 years, during which time the LTTE had been fighting for a separate state called Tamil Eelam.

The LTTE, also commonly referred to as the Tamil Tigers, emerged as one of a growing number of vociferous Tamil rights groups in northern Sri Lanka during the 1970s. By the early 1980s it had developed, under the charismatic and authoritarian leadership of Vellipullai Prabahakaran, into a militant separatist movement which rapidly grew to become one of the most ruthless and formidable rebel organisations in the world. Wrestling control of significant swathes of territory from the government of Sri Lanka in both the north and east of the country, the LTTE pursued its contested claims for an independent homeland or ‘Eelam’ for Sri Lanka’s Tamils through two decades of military engagement with the government. This was supplemented by regular acts of terrorism, earning it

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condemnation and proscription by many in the international community. There is an extensive literature describing the history, characteristics and roots of the conflict (de Silva 1981, 1986; Frerks and Klem 2004; Richardson 2005; Wilson 2000), the nature of the LTTE (Ann 1993; Balasingham 2001, 2004; Gunaratna 1994; Joshi 1996; Swamy 1994, 2004), and the associated peace processes from the different political perspectives (Ferdinands et al. 2004; Gooneratne 2007; Gunasekera 1996; Rotberg 1999; Rupesinghe 1998, 2006; Uyangoda and Perera 2002; World Alliance for Peace 2005).

In the year following the ceasefire the authors designed and implemented a postgraduate diploma in conflict resolution and peace preparedness which ran in two sites within the government-controlled areas of Sri Lanka, Matara and Vavuniya (Harris and Lewer 2005). Learning from this experience, we began to look at the possibility of providing the same course in the LTTE-controlled territory of northern Sri Lanka and in this second article we examine the experience of conducting the course in such a conflict-affected environment.

Prior to the ceasefire agreement, the LTTE's political and administrative leaders, who were now tasked with having to help make any peace settlement 'work', had been mostly engaged in military activities. To help provide knowledge relating to comparative and critical learning, analytical skills and theoretical insights required to address the difficulties of building a sustainable peace, the international community had been engaged in supporting the promotion of non-violent conflict resolution approaches amongst the LTTE's leadership in the north. International donor-funded activities included study trips to other countries to expose the LTTE to liberal democratic governance, human rights and comparative peace processes; specialist short visits to the LTTE-controlled areas by legal and international affairs specialists from amongst the Tamil diaspora and other international experts in a wide range of post-conflict related fields; and in-country training through workshops, seminars and educational courses.

However, none of these initiatives attempted to establish a formal, internationally validated course in LTTE-occupied territory. This article examines the work of the peace studies programme and the Department of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford in implementing such a course during the brief ceasefire agreement period of Sri Lanka's conflict. The postgraduate diploma we will describe is, we think, a landmark in peace education, when an internationally recognised higher educational course on peace and conflict resolution has been implemented in an area under the de facto authority of a militant separatist group with their full knowledge, cooperation and participation.

Education in conflict zones

There is a growing literature related to education in conflict and emergency situations (Anderson et al. 2006; Bekerman and McGlynn 2007; Bensallah et al. 2000; Davies 2004; Salomon, 2004; Seitz 2004; Sibbons 2004; Tomlinson and Benefield 2005), most of which is concerned with education in schools, the reconstruction of public educational provision, or the improvement of inter-group dialogue and understanding at primary and secondary levels. Several networks have also been set up to help educators and practitioners share experience and knowledge in such situations. These include the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) which has a steering group consisting of UNHCR, UNESCO, UNICEF, International Rescue Committee, CARE USA, the World Bank and the Norwegian Refugee Council (UNHCR 2006); UNESCO's Education in Situations of Emergency, Crisis and Reconstruction Programme (UNESCO 2003) and the Commonwealth Secretariat's conference on 'Promoting Education in Crisis and Post Conflict Reconstruction in Africa' (Commonwealth Secretariat n.d.). The importance of

the role of education in promoting and helping to establish sustainable peace has been recognised by the dozens of non-governmental organisations and international donors who currently support and fund peace education programmes. It is within this field that we locate our current research and practice.

Negotiating the educational space in northern Sri Lanka

Discussions with students enrolled on our first diploma programme (2003–2004), who had links into the LTTE-controlled Wannu region, suggested that there was an awareness of, and interest in, the diploma programme by the LTTE administration. Contact was made with key interlocutors and negotiations begun to obtain agreement for the programme to be conducted in the Wannu region's administrative capital of Kilinochchi. This process took approximately six months.

Our initial approach was through two key contacts, the Government Agent (GA) for Kilinochchi and the Director of the Sub-Committee on Immediate Humanitarian and Rehabilitation Needs in the North and East (SIHRN). The GA is a civil service appointee who is the most senior representative of the Sri Lanka government in each of the country's administrative districts with responsibility for the functioning of public utilities, works, health, education and other services. Despite the fact that much of Kilinochchi District had been held by the LTTE during 20 years preceding the ceasefire agreement, they had not sought to dismantle the pre-existing administrative structure, but rather created a number of parallel institutions. Thus, unusually, the government has maintained an official and central administrative presence in the district throughout the conflict period. In terms of educational access for the peace studies programme, the support of the GA was important because *ipso facto*, it meant that the government of Sri Lanka would be aware, and tacitly approving of the initiative.

SIHRN, based in Kilinochchi, had been established by the LTTE and the government as a joint mechanism for channelling post-ceasefire rehabilitation funding from bilateral and multilateral donors through to the areas controlled by the LTTE. However, because of continuing tensions relating to the modalities of aid delivery, SIHRN did not function as planned, but nevertheless retained an administrative infrastructure which included office premises and a staff that comprised both Sri Lankan government and LTTE-appointed personnel. The director of SIHRN was an LTTE appointee who was a senior and respected member of their cadre and who played the role of key interlocutor between the LTTE, international aid community and the government on issues of access for humanitarian assistance. Obtaining the support of SIHRN's director was regarded by the peace studies programme as critical in negotiating authorisation for the course with the LTTE hierarchy. Both the GA and the director of SIHRN welcomed the possibility of such an initiative and both endorsed the suggestion of SIHRN – located within the government's district office complex or *kachcheri* – as the preferred local partner for the peace studies programme in Kilinochchi.

The SIHRN building represented as neutral a location as could be hoped for in a conflict area under the control of a non-state armed group. The possibility of using an international non-governmental organisation or other international organisations (such as UNHCR) as an entry point and for teaching venues, as we had done previously in the government-controlled area of Vavuniya (Harris and Lewer 2005), was not appropriate. This was because of the potential for the agendas of these agencies (especially related to the fields of protection, advocacy and rehabilitation) to cause friction with the LTTE, and thus disrupt the smooth operation of the diploma course. Some of the international organisations working in the

Wanni region had previously experienced difficulties, including blockades and demonstrations outside their offices, the imposition of restrictions in and out of LTTE-controlled areas and, on occasions, temporary expulsion. Because of the conflict there was also no locally functioning university or college to liaise with in Kilinochchi District. Other administrative offices were either directly a part of the government's district secretariat structure or the LTTE's administrative apparatus. SIHRN was the only functioning administrative framework that involved both parties.

Academic integrity

Issues raised by the LTTE, through the director of SIHRN, included questions about the profiles of the lecturers, the course content and the materials to be used. Prior to negotiations with the LTTE, the peace studies programme and the Centre for Conflict Resolution in the Department of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford had agreed internally that the academic integrity and quality assurance standards of the diploma course could not be maintained if there was to be compromise on these elements. The precondition for running the programme in Kilinochchi was that there would be no external interference, and it was stipulated to the LTTE that the diploma would not run if this requirement could not be met.

Acceptance of this represented a remarkable concession from the LTTE. Considering the way in which access to information is normally restricted and controlled in the Wanni, the diploma programme could have been regarded as a threat since resource persons included lecturers who had a history of being openly critical of the LTTE. Furthermore, many of the texts used on the course, besides presenting alternative and non-violent peace and conflict resolution perspectives, also challenged many of the tenets of LTTE political ideology, or were directly critical of their actions.

It is argued that a key reason that the LTTE agreed that the course could be conducted without restrictions lay in the diploma's position as a 'safe' academic space. The foundations for this space were provided through the offices of a respected and internationally recognised UK university which had no political affiliations or other agendas in Sri Lanka. This is in contrast to other 'workshop'-type interventions which are often linked to furthering the organisations' own agenda, for example human rights advocacy or western good governance programmes.

Insisting on the diploma as a serious and high-quality academic qualification located it firmly in the educational domain. Studying peace and conflict resolution in order to obtain a higher educational award proved to be more palatable – and less political – than attending a workshop with a distinct peace-building, governance reform, human rights or social harmony agenda. Unlike workshop-based peace and conflict resolution interventions, the diploma holds an intrinsic value to the individual whose reward is directly proportional to the effort he or she invests in studying. In a conflict-affected environment where, for over 20 years, higher educational opportunities were severely restricted for the majority of the Wanni population, local access to international university-level learning was extremely appealing.

Student selection

The diploma course was advertised in the newspaper in the Wanni, and flyers sent to local and international agencies working in the area. Application forms were collected from SIHRN, who were responsible for ensuring that the completed forms were returned to the

peace studies programme. Over 60 applications were received from a wide cross-section of civil society and local administration in the Wannu. Applicants included senior and middle-ranking officers from the government *kachcheri*, SIHRN, Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation, police, various LTTE administrative bodies, schoolteachers, local business people and the personnel of both local and international NGOs. All were called for interview.

Interviews took place at the SIHRN office in Kilinochchi and were conducted by a panel that included the director of the peace studies programme together with a member of the diploma programme faculty and, for some of the interviews, either the director of SIHRN or a visiting LTTE advisor from the UK diaspora community. The final decision for selection rested with the peace studies programme and the University of Bradford. The criteria employed involved: (a) an assessment of the potential students' intellectual capacity and ability to study in English at the required level; (b) an assessment of their motivation and interest in the subject; (c) an assurance of commitment to allocate sufficient study time; and (d) prior educational experience. Motivation to study for a diploma in conflict resolution and peace preparedness was high amongst the applicants, and all expressed an appreciation of the subject and its relevance to both the local and national conflict context. There was a general perception that the subject matter might offer possibilities for a way forward and an alternative to violent conflict.

Although most of the interviewed applicants had the required intellectual capacity to study at diploma level, the ability of some to function adequately in English was poor and this reduced the pool of potential students. The stronger applicants came mostly from amongst the international NGO community who had greater exposure to English language usage in their working environment, and from the more senior LTTE applicants who had received special instruction in English from local elders and visiting diaspora as part of their in-service training and development. Some of the older applicants had an impeccable command of English, having been educated in this medium. The lack of acceptable English but possession of strong intellectual capacities suggested the possibility of Tamil language courses being made available in the future to enable the subject to reach a wider audience.

Thirty-two candidates were accepted and, of these, 25 initially confirmed their offer of a place on the programme. This group of 25 consisted of 12 people from different LTTE administrative divisions (peace secretariat, political wing, TRO, planning and development secretariat, police and judiciary), four from SIHRN (including two government-seconded personnel – one Sinhala and one Moslem – thus enabling the course to have at least minimum representation from Sri Lanka's other major ethnic communities, the other students all being Tamil). The remaining nine students included an architect, a draughtsman, a statistician from the district secretariat, two teachers, a medical doctor, a businessman from the local private sector and an officer from a national NGO.

Funding issues

Despite a large number of initial applications from international NGO personnel, none were ultimately able to attend. Whilst local NGO, LTTE and government servants were offered the course free of charge, the peace studies programme had decided to charge a fee of GBP £1000 – subsidised from an actual cost of GBP £3000 per person – for those working with international organisations. We thought that the international NGOs would be willing to support their personnel in this cost, as it would contribute to staff and organisational capacity development, and would also be an opportunity for international agency personnel to interact with senior LTTE cadres in a safe educational space over a sustained period.

We also argued that it would be unfair to offer the diploma free for staff of international agencies, on the same terms as local agencies, because there were large disparities in disposable income both for international NGO individuals and the organisations themselves. We wanted as much organisational commitment to the diploma through a financial ‘buy-in’, and were attempting to make the diploma less reliant on outside funding and more self-sustainable. In retrospect we could have done more to raise awareness about the utility of the course effectively with the heads of missions and other international NGO managers.

Implementing the course

Administration – twin batches

Although this article focuses on the diploma as it was conducted in Kilinochchi District, it should be noted that the peace studies programme had a parallel batch of students who were enrolled on an identical course based in Colombo. This batch of students included senior Sri Lankan government military and police officers, university lecturers, civil servants, a parliamentarian, NGO workers and two foreign students, one from a diplomatic mission and the other from a United Nations department.

Both batches followed an identical curriculum, were taught by the same lecturers, had access to the same materials, and a comparable level of tutorial support. Despite the sensitivities that could have been involved in having both LTTE and Sri Lankan government officers following the same course, albeit in separate locations, the peace studies programme ensured that the students in each batch were fully aware of the presence and student composition of the other. Although the proposition of joint classes was regularly mooted with enthusiasm by both batches, the practicalities of obtaining the necessary clearance for either LTTE cadres to travel to Colombo or Sri Lankan military officers to go to Kilinochchi ultimately proved unworkable. A combined module attended by the civil society members of the Colombo batch was, however, successfully held in Kilinochchi and is described more fully below.

Conducting twin batches of the diploma was important for two main reasons. Firstly, it was regarded as a safeguard against possible criticism of the programme. Although the political environment at the time was largely tolerant of engagement with the LTTE at different levels, and supportive of a range of development initiatives in the Wanni, the organisers of the diploma programme were acutely aware that there was, amongst some quarters of the southern polity, an abiding deep-seated scepticism regarding the ceasefire agreement and the LTTE’s motives. By openly providing a common educational experience to participants from both sides of the conflict we sought to reduce the risk of our organisation being viewed as partial to a particular side.

Secondly, running concurrent batches had financial benefits. The cost of running two programmes was not significantly higher than that of running one – particularly as core expenses such as the University of Bradford’s charges, lecturer flights from the UK, local administrative salaries and overheads were fixed costs irrespective of whether one or two batches were taught. Although funding from the Facilitating Local Initiatives for Conflict Transformation programme was ostensibly allocated to the Kilinochchi component, most of the costs for the Colombo batch were also covered from this grant, with the balance being raised by charging higher fees to the foreign participants and those working with international agencies in order to offset the costs of participants from local NGOs and government departments whose potential to self-fund or obtain institution support from their employers was limited.

Faculty

This involved the mobilisation of 40 resource people as lecturers, tutors and guest speakers that included lecturers from the universities of Bradford and Oxford in the UK, from the universities of Colombo, Kelaniya, Jaffna, Eastern University and Peredeniya in Sri Lanka, and senior civil society practitioners working in relief, development and peace-related fields. Our resource people brought to the diploma programme a breadth and depth of experience spanning the theoretical and practical dimensions of peace-building, conflict resolution, human rights, gender and development that had not previously been experienced in Kilinochchi. They were representative of the Sri Lankan ethnic and political community and included Sinhalese Buddhists, Christians, Moslems and people with former JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (Peoples Liberation Front)) experience, which meant that students were exposed to a wide range of critical perspectives relating both to international peace issues and the Sri Lankan situation.

Student experience

While the structure and content of the course has been described in some detail in a previous article (Harris and Lewer 2005), it is helpful to note again the modules that were offered to the students. These were:

- Conflict dynamics and conflict analysis (10 credits, compulsory)
- Conflict resolution theory and practice (10 credits, compulsory)
- Human rights, reconciliation and justice (10 credits, optional)
- Peace, conflict and development (10 credits, optional)
- Gender, peace and conflict (10 credits, optional)
- Religion and conflict transformation (10 credits, optional)
- Culture and conflict (10 credits, optional)
- Comparative peace processes (10 credits, optional)
- Project dissertation (60 credits, compulsory).

Students had to select four of the optional modules. An introductory workshop and the eight modules (see Harris and Lewer 2005) were taught in tandem in Kilinochchi and Colombo over a period of 12 months.

Whilst most modules were taught separately because it would have been difficult for students at the Colombo venue who were members of the security forces to travel into LTTE territory, for the 'Culture and conflict' module a group of students from Colombo crossed over the frontline checkpoint to study in Kilinochchi. This proved to be a rich experience for the students, providing a forum for exposure to different and strongly held perspectives of the conflict.

Similarly, during the 'Gender, peace and conflict' module taught in Kilinochchi, the class was audited by the local staff from a leading Wanni-based international NGO. Discussions about women's rights in the Wanni proved challenging for the students. For example, students from the LTTE administration claimed that their movement had an exemplary record on women's rights and that rape and domestic abuse were unheard of in their territory. However, this was contested by a gender officer from the international NGO, who claimed that their organisation had evidence that violence against women was in fact widespread. Although such an exchange was clearly uncomfortable, it demonstrated how a safe educational space enables the articulation of criticism and debate that would otherwise be difficult. In both instances, whilst the debates were vigorous, all the

students respected the academic space which enabled the encounters to be depoliticised and depersonalised.

Given the restricted opportunities in the Wannu for people at any level to be exposed to, and engage in, critical debate outside the prescribed canon of LTTE ideology, this dimension of the diploma is as important as the actual course content. Whilst there was this observed freedom of argument and expression during the classes as recorded above, it must also be noted that students were undoubtedly constrained in fully and freely articulating their ideas because of the personal risks involved in doing so. In a totalitarian society, such as that found under the LTTE, criticism of the centre could have the gravest consequences for the individual, and there are limitations for open debate, even within such a 'safe' educational space. In addition to personal security concerns, the skills of critical inquiry and analysis are underdeveloped in such protracted conflict where society has not had the benefit of a tradition of open and independent educational environment.

Additional learning experiences

As well as the diploma programme described in Harris and Lewer (2005), the Kilinochchi students were exposed to two additional learning experiences which were brought in by the peace studies programme as value addition. The first involved a three-day programme on non-violent communications conducted by a local NGO, and the second was a two-day programme in essay writing and dissertation development skills conducted by a PhD student from a UK university.

Teaching and learning perspectives

Student progression in critical and reflective competencies is revealed through two different lecture experiences. During the initial introductory workshop students were asked to identify great leaders in the field of peace and human rights. Although the lecturer was thinking of examples such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, a number of students cited the LTTE leader Prabhakaran. Their reasoning was that Prabhakaran was fighting for the rights of the Tamils so that they could live in peace, with violence being a justified means to an end. Such a response points to the persuasive power of an authoritarian regime's propaganda to inculcate popular compliance around a narrow interpretation of the LTTE's armed struggle. It indicates the challenges that this poses to teaching a higher-level course which, in normal educational circumstances, presupposes that students will be free to exercise an independence of thought and willingly engage in debates that may challenge the received orthodoxy in their society.

In a subsequent module students were asked to examine the relationship between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government during the conflict period since 1983, and to come up with a list of the positive elements of that relationship. Although they initially refused, the lecturer pointed out that he wasn't asking them to say that they agreed with or supported the other side, only to examine the relationship between the parties and to see if the long list of negative elements that are routinely articulated could, in any way, be balanced by some positive ones. The students returned with lists that included the fact that both the government and LTTE administrations were able to coexist in the Wannu, and that the government had maintained provision of, and access to, primary and secondary education, health services, medical supplies and food aid. Both sides had permitted international NGO access and had agreed 'days of tranquillity' as informal temporary ceasefires to facilitate humanitarian interventions such as polio vaccinations. These examples demonstrate that over the

course of the diploma programme there was a progression in terms of analytical development amongst many of the students.

Student progression

The number of Kilinochchi students who completed the course was rather low. Of the original 25 students accepted, only eight eventually graduated – three with postgraduate certificates and five awarded postgraduate diplomas. Of the others, one student passed away, one failed, and the remainder were deemed withdrawn from the programme. The number of students who are recorded as having withdrawn from the programme is of some concern and merits further analysis. Of these, five failed to submit any assignments whatsoever, one did not turn up to any of the lectures, and the others withdrew from the diploma after completing a few of the modules and failing the assessments, or withdrew after submitting and passing a few essays.

Two students presented written reasons for leaving – a medical doctor was unable to find time to study and attend lectures as he was usually the only practitioner on call at the local hospital; and one of the female students became pregnant and could not attend due to both medical reasons and cultural expectations regarding confinement. Two other students left to work in other parts of the country. Of the remaining enrolled students who either did not actually attend any of the lectures, or departed during the programme, none offered an explanation or responded to the peace studies programme requests for such. The level of English required and the amount of work involved may have dissuaded some of these students from continuing. However, two of the students were local schoolteachers, had excellent English skills and at interview were extremely frank about the need to develop peace-related perspectives in the Wannu. It is possible that a number of those students who left the programme did so because of external pressure.

The cohort of students that remained was mostly SIHRN employees or senior LTTE cadres. One could perhaps surmise from this that the local authorities, whilst not interfering with the actual student selection, course content or lecturers, may nevertheless have had a hand in influencing attendance and ensuring that the majority of those students who remained through to graduation were trusted members of the LTTE who could be relied upon to evaluate and utilise their learning judiciously.

The Indian Ocean tsunami, which occurred a month before the students were due to hand in their final essays and dissertation, profoundly disrupted the diploma programme. Two of the strongest students were directly involved in coordinating the local disaster response, and, having completed and passed all six essays, decided not to complete the dissertation and only graduate with a postgraduate certificate.

Evaluating the impact of the diploma programme

Despite the apparent low progression and completion rate, for eight students to achieve certificates and diploma passes is, we think, rather remarkable given the most difficult of educational contexts within which the diploma programme was implemented. The impact of the Kilinochchi course should not just be evaluated in terms of the number of students who passed at this advanced level. It was the first postgraduate-level course in any subject or language medium to be offered in Kilinochchi since the beginning of hostilities in 1983. It took place in a deeply conflict-affected area of northern Sri Lanka under the control of a militant separatist movement whose authoritarian control is renowned for its violent suppression of opposition and dissent, and where the capacity of civil society in LTTE-controlled

areas to act as a critical voice is virtually non-existent. Despite these conditions and the broader context of suspended peace talks, a fragile ceasefire agreement and a devastating national disaster, eight students had the resolve to overcome these adversities and complete their studies.

During the initial development phase of the course there was much scepticism from donor, international NGO and academic quarters in the south that a diploma course on conflict resolution and peace preparedness could be conducted in Kilinochchi, given the LTTE's history of rejecting peace-related activities by other organisations in areas under their control. One of the most significant impacts of the course, therefore, is that it took place at all, and that it was sanctioned by the uppermost echelons of the LTTE hierarchy. This, in itself, signified a willingness within the LTTE to explore the ideas presented through a peace studies perspective. Although the motives for exposure to peace-related learning may have been more a strategic desire to comprehend and engage with the western donors' and international NGOs' preoccupation with the peace-building project, this by no means negates the significance and impact of LTTE involvement as students on the course.

The LTTE students on the diploma included the editor of Tamilnet (a key media tool of the LTTE), and deputy directors of the LTTE peace secretariat, the LTTE political wing and the LTTE planning and development secretariat. Three of the students were known to have been involved in the peace talks with the United National Party (UNP) government as part of the LTTE negotiating team. These students were also involved in drafting the LTTE's proposals for an Interim Self-Governing Authority in the north and east, and the Post-Tsunami Operational Mechanism. Most had previous military experience as senior field commanders and had made the transition to administrative duties, presumably because of their loyalty to the LTTE, as well as their political, management and analytical skills. This group of students represents some of the future potential senior leadership of the LTTE.

Knowledge transfer

The diploma programme exposed students in Kilinochchi, both civil society and LTTE cadre, to new ideas, critical thinking and the challenging perspectives of a wide range of faculty from the south of Sri Lanka and the international community. The question of how this learning will impact upon the policies and practices of the LTTE is, however, difficult to evaluate. The question of attribution is problematic, as the LTTE also had access to other types of peace-related resources and input through the Tamil diaspora, visiting academics, delegations to foreign capitals, and the Internet. Whilst it is impossible to assess accurately exactly how participation in the diploma programme informed LTTE thinking during the peace talks in Geneva (in February 2006), we do know that the programme's graduates were directly involved in planning the LTTE's strategy for the Geneva talks, as well as participating in the negotiations. That the diploma programme was viewed as worthwhile by the most senior levels of the LTTE is illustrated by the fact that both the heads of the LTTE's political wing and their peace secretariat are reported to have commented on the diploma programme to visiting diplomats, aid agency heads, researchers and academics as an example of the LTTE's openness to peace-related ideas.

One indicator of impact would have been the involvement of the Kilinochchi students in an alumni programme. During the award ceremony in October 2005 the graduates had expressed an interest in joining the alumni and had requested that the peace studies programme and University of Bradford provide a continued learning programme for them. However, subsequent moves to develop this further were rejected. Although not implicitly stated by the graduates, communications with them suggested that the increasing fragility

of the ceasefire agreement and the possibility of a resumption of hostilities over the November 2005 to January 2006 period rendered further studies or alumni activity politically contentious and at odds with the LTTE's perceived more hawkish rhetoric. An early warning of this was actually signalled at the time of the award ceremony. Organisers of the diploma programme had been concerned that the LTTE might use the award ceremony as a media publicity event, and were concerned about the implications of media exposure for the programme's other courses in the south. There was, however, no such publicity from the LTTE side, and no mention of the diploma appeared on Tamilnet. In retrospect this probably indicated an early distancing of the LTTE from the peace studies course as political tensions were beginning to rise.

These issues reveal that the position of formal tertiary-level peace studies as a safe educational space in a contested conflict-affected environment is only possible when the political context is conducive and open to enabling such courses. Such windows of opportunity need to be seized quickly. Furthermore, the presence of the course itself can take on wider political and symbolic meaning. When the diploma course started it promoted the notion of an LTTE willing to be exposed to new and challenging ideas and was embraced. However, towards the end of the diploma programme it posed a contradiction to the LTTE's political position and needed to be put at a distance.

Conclusion

At the time of writing it is still impossible to assess the longer-term impact that conducting a postgraduate diploma in conflict resolution and peace preparedness, in territory held by the LTTE, will ultimately have on the future of Sri Lanka's conflict. By the time of the diploma graduation ceremony in Kilinochchi the ceasefire agreement had already started to unravel and within a year terrorist attacks, assassination attempts and large-scale military engagements had once again become defining features of the relationship between the government and the LTTE. Despite the prevailing escalation of violence there are a number of important lessons that peace educators involved in the formal and tertiary sectors can draw from the peace studies programme's experience in northern Sri Lanka. We would argue, as we will show below, that despite the sceptics we have demonstrated that it is possible to design a safe educational space in such a fluid and uncertain environment.

Lessons for peace education in conflict zones

Firstly, this initiative demonstrates that it is possible to conduct an unencumbered, peace-related higher educational course within the non-traditional learning environment of a conflict-affected setting controlled by an authoritarian rebel regime. By taking advantage of a temporary thaw in relationships between the main protagonists, the peace studies programme gained access at a time when both sides were willing to engage more openly with the possibilities for peace. However, as this willingness was eroded, educational access to the LTTE was increasingly restricted as evidenced by the lack of local publicity surrounding the graduation ceremony and the subsequent rejection of follow-up courses which had previously been requested by the Kilinochchi alumni.

Secondly, the initiative reveals that access to conduct such courses in conflict-affected environments is dependent upon the critical, yet variable, determinants of timing, a high level of acceptance within the local leadership, their perception of the utility of the course, and their assessment of its risks. The endorsement of the course by local leaders was a crucial aspect of gaining access. Cultivating relationships with interlocutors who could

represent the course to the key decision-makers in the LTTE was a time-consuming but vital element in gaining local acceptability. Early engagement with such contacts helps build a level of trust between local authorities and course providers that is necessary for successful implementation. It also points to the need for programme implementers to have a long knowledge and experience of the conflict context within which they are to work, and of local and national sensitivities. Ultimately, however, the decision by the LTTE leadership to allow access was most likely a calculated one, balancing the possible risks against the anticipated gains. Although the LTTE's reasoning for sanctioning access remains a matter of conjecture, it may be that it was seen as a rare higher educational opportunity (for trusted cadre) in its own right, and regarded as an opportunity to gain local access to international perspectives on peace studies.

Thirdly, we were transparent in our process and, with careful monitoring, we think we prevented the promotion of political agendas or ideologies both by the faculty and the students.

Fourthly, the delivery of such formal adult educational programmes is not without risks to the implementers. As we have noted in our previous article, in the context of highly charged and emotional conflict situations there is a danger of being labelled as pro one faction against another. We worked hard to demonstrate our educational neutrality by offering the same experience to students in the south as well as the LTTE-controlled north of Sri Lanka, and insisted on the same quality control assurances for both batches of students. We acknowledge that we could stand exposed to accusations of bias, but this is always a risk when working in such an environment.

The capacity of students to look at their own conflict context differently was, for us, one of the key learning objectives of the diploma programme, and an essential skill in conflict resolution and peace preparedness. Learning in environments under the control of traditionally totalitarian regimes has inherent limitations and dangers. During the period when this course was held, students who participated on the Kilinochchi course started grappling with critical challenges in their work spheres, such as the establishment of gender-sensitive development plans and strategies for the demobilisation and reintegration of child combatants, and they will be faced with these questions again at some point in the future. These real-world issues acutely underline the significance of applied theoretical studies in peace preparedness, conflict resolution and post-conflict recovery as an important component in developing the capacity of decision-makers, practitioners, managers, administrators and others who are tasked with making peace work at both a policy and an operational level. Perhaps the contribution of the postgraduate diploma is small within the overall context of the many problems that face Sri Lanka, but we hope that it will contribute in helping the key stakeholders to effectively negotiate the multitude of complex issues that face a transitional society emerging from years of protracted conflict.

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