



Good Friday lessons for Cyprus

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By Esra Aygin

Civil society engagement is of vital importance in bringing any political settlement negotiation to success, said John McKinney, who played an important role in the Northern Ireland peace process.

McKinney was the chief executive of Omagh District Council in Northern Ireland during the process of achieving the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. This brought an end to the 30 years of conflict in the country. He said a well-constructed and empowered civil society gave political parties a clear mandate and confidence to negotiate.

“This is the main reason Good Friday Agreement was different from the previous failed attempts at a settlement,” McKinney underlined.

McKinney was speaking at the symposium titled “No Future Without Forgiveness” held as part of the International Day of Peace celebrations at the Ledra Palace Buffer Zone.

He said all agreements made before the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland failed mainly because they were made behind closed doors without the engagement of civil society.

If the aim is a sustainable settlement, “you can only negotiate what your citizens support,” said McKinney, drawing attention to the significance of citizen peace building and its eventual connection with a political settlement. “Involve the civil society in your negotiations.”

During the process that led to the Good Friday Agreement, the negotiators held constant consultations with civil society groups and negotiating structures were created to permit direct and indirect access to peace talks by various interest groups.

While previous settlement attempts excluded more extreme groups, the Good Friday Agreement process engaged the ‘potential spoilers’ on the assumption that “if you are part of the problem, you need to be part of the solution.”

The inclusion of a wide-range of stakeholders minimised spoilers provided the process with the necessary legitimacy and enabled the building of consensus, said McKinney.

“Inclusion is of utmost importance,” he said. “You are not the only peacemaker – the guy next to you is just as important to the settlement process.”

Civil society during the settlement process also organised various peace-building initiatives, reconciliation programmes and cross-community contact to create an atmosphere of trust and cooperation.

For example, a citizens’ inquiry commission encouraged various groups in the community to start thinking about the future and increased the citizens’ engagement with the political process. A group of academicians conducted “peace polls” to gauge public opinion on key issues.

This helped negotiators figure out what would be an acceptable agreement to the community at large. A number of civil society groups, organised storytelling, dialogue groups, and problem-solving workshops to overcome the pervasive destructive images of the “enemy.”

On several occasions, civil society groups have organised rallies and demonstrations with hopes of convincing “spoiler” groups.

The civil society also played a pioneering role in carrying out the “Yes” campaign for the referendum on the Good Friday Power Sharing Agreement in May 1998. The Republic of Ireland supported the agreement by 94% while Northern Ireland backed it by 72%.

McKinney, whose significant role in forgiveness and reconciliation after the bombing in Omagh only four months after the Good Friday Agreement gave him worldwide recognition, said it was again the community solidarity in the most part lead by civil society that prevented the attack from derailing the peace process and collapsing the whole agreement. “A good-willed, cooperating community lead by civil society, saved the day,” said McKinney.

As well as drawing on the successes of the Good Friday Agreement process, McKinney also talked about the mistakes that left Northern Ireland still experiencing problems on the road to reconciliation 17 years on after the agreement.

According to the experienced McKinney, moving fast after achieving a settlement is vital. He said this was something that Northern Ireland failed to do after the Good Friday Agreement. “We moved too slow,” said McKinney. “When you achieve an agreement you have to move fast in implementation. If you leave any vacuum, something – and usually negative voices looking to exploit the shortcomings – will fill it.

We did not move fast enough and the 28% that rejected the agreement in the referendum became very vocal.”

Another mistake committed by Northern Ireland was to keep too many of the old guard in government after the settlement, according to McKinney. “People with old ways of thinking and pre-settlement mindsets” usually are not able to adapt to the new way of things necessary to sustain an agreement, McKinney said.

Underlining the fact that reconciliation and peace-making is not just with ‘the other side’ but also within the community, McKinney said the people who have voted against the agreement should be taken into consideration and ways should be found to work with them and in time, to include them in the reconciliation process.

McKinney also drew attention to the importance of dealing with the past, and continuous work to build trust, respect and forgiveness in the aftermath of a solution. “Place the words in large letters on your wall – TRUST, FORGIVENESS, RESPECT” said McKinney.

Lastly, McKinney underlined that reconciliation is not an event but a process that requires a lot of effort. “Every solution brings new problems. Be ready for round two,” he said.