

LET'S BUILD PEACE, HERE AND ANOW: DAWN SHACKELS IN CONVERSATION WITH BASSMA KODMANI

This is the second in a series of conversations in which peacebuilders explore the intricacies, the satisfactions and sorrows of their work. In this conversation, Barry Knight and Rasha Sansur introduce Dawn Shackels of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and Syrian activist Bassma Kodmani.

Rasha: Foundations for Peace is a network of international and independent philanthropic organisations working towards local peacebuilding and social justice. The local element is key. We centre local knowledge and direct it towards affected communities. and in order to do so, we use advocacy to try and change the development aid architecture in conflict or post-conflict regions and today's conversation will help highlight the importance of local peacebuilding.

Barry: Just to add that Foundations for Peace has been going for over 15 years now, and it's been very successful in its work at the local level. For example in Northern Ireland, the politicians got the credit, but it was organisation's like Dawn's, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) working with women across the peace divide that really made the difference. And that's the kind of perspective we're trying to bring to our work.

Last year we did a survey with Candid, which showed the peacebuilding deficit – that funders and philanthropists in particular did not really understand the social processes that drive conflict, and their connection with social justice and these conversations are designed to help remedy that deficit. We want to build an anthology of stories from different parts of the world, deliberately choosing people for a conversation from different cultures to compare their experience.

So first of all I'd like to introduce the two principals in this conversation. Dawn, who in addition to being Head of Policy and Practice at CFNI, is also the anchor person for Foundations for Peace. And Bassma, a scholar by background, who has devoted the last 10 years of her life to peace in Syria.

Dawn: The main area that I lead at CFNI is trying to ensure that the communities in Northern Ireland are able to thrive after the conflict. At the moment, this is being put to the test. The repercussions of the UK's decision to leave the European Union and the Northern Ireland Protocol are affecting the loyalist communities in particular and the need for support and for intervention has never been more important.

Barry: Bassma would you like to briefly introduce yourself?

Bassma: I am a scholar by training and vocation and continue that work in parallel with a 30-year commitment to the Palestinian cause, and then the last 10 years on Syria. I have been told several times that I

spend my life fighting for lost causes, but the more I'm told that, the more determined I think I grow.

As soon as the uprising in Syria started, I joined the first coalition of the opposition, and then on and off I was part of the official or recognised opposition negotiating team in Geneva. I resigned from that and I am now a member of the Constitutional Committee which was established about two years ago to negotiate a new constitution for Syria but mainly I work as a scholar. I write for two think-tanks on conflict issues and more generally on the Middle East.

Dawn: Bassma I had the pleasure of listening to the webinar series that you were part of, convened by 'We Contain Multitudes', and I was really inspired by your story and the work that you've been doing. What motivated you to get involved in peacebuilding, and in particular to get involved in the conflict work with Syria?

Bassma: Very basic reasons. I am of Syrian origin and my family was exiled from Syria when I was very young and on the day of the uprising, this became crucial to my work, because it was the meaning of my life. We had lost the country to the dictatorship and there was such a great hope that the people were claiming it back their country that I went for it immediately. It wasn't about peacebuilding, it was about the uprising. It was a very easy cause to defend, everybody in the world thought, 'Here are these nice peaceful demonstrators who only want democracy in their country,' so we were supported by almost the whole international community. Then the uprising developed into a war and it became about peacebuilding but without quite defining it that way. I wasn't in the peacebuilding industry, I was involved personally and emotionally.

Dawn: In the work that we do, there can often be a conflict between those emotions and the fight for justice. What have been the challenges for you in that regard?

Bassma: One is that I was very reluctant to accept that there were sectarian divisions, that there was distrust between communities. We all attributed divisions *just* to the dictatorship, and to a very large extent the dictatorship was responsible but the result was that this was a divided country, socially.

Secondly, I was very frustrated with my own group, the opposition, because they were so divided. We were facing a very nasty dictatorship which required unity, cohesion, discipline and hard work in order to gain the trust of the people on the ground, as well as the international community etc and I felt we were not up to the challenge.

Also, at some point, I was the only woman in the leading official positions of the opposition, and it was a very hostile environment. I discovered how much it was important to defend women's participation, which was something I had never really felt the urge to engage with and, after the disappointment of several years' working

with the opposition, I worked with a group of women to establish a women's political movement, which is thriving and which is a source of great satisfaction. I felt 'OK, the woman in me needs to get satisfaction on that level, because this is a long term fight irrespective of the rest.'

But, the most frustrating thing was losing the narrative, which benefitted the dictatorship. What had been a peaceful uprising against dictatorship became for the international community a war between two parties, on the one hand, a regime that holds a *huge* arsenal of very sophisticated weapons including chemical weapons that it is using against its own population, while those on the other side, the rebels gained external support countries whose agendas I wasn't too comfortable with. So the narrative became distorted into a global fight against ISIS and we lost completely the narrative.

I was always convinced that we held the moral high ground but we wanted to get the international community to be interested in Syria for the right reasons, not just because it became a source of instability, terrorism and we felt – I felt – no one was really willing to bother, because getting to the root causes is so time-consuming and painful.

Dawn: In the Northern Ireland context, too, the narrative and getting to the root causes is still one of the biggest issues dividing us.

We can't agree the narrative as to why the troubles started. Last Thursday [in the 'We Contain Multitudes' conversation], we talked about how the language used has been divisive. Northern Ireland is two different communities. We usually have in each community two of everything, from healthcare to leisure services. People feel safe staying and commuting within their own space, and that space itself is being contested in so many ways.

I was also listening to what you said about being the only woman in a very male-dominated space. I struggle with that and it can be a bit lonely at times. Even as recently as last year – 2020! - I was in a conversation about peacebuilding and legacy issues, and I was the only woman in the room. You have to try and change those attitudes and bring forward the other perspectives. How have you tried to overcome that?

Bassma: As I said, I lost hope in working from inside that opposition body, so we established the women's political movement. I learned the hard lesson that on my own, however smart I was, I wasn't going to make it. They would continue to dismiss me as soon as they could, because after all, these were positions of power. They didn't see the responsibilities we had, because sooner or later, we were going to be in Damascus and governing the country, that was the thinking. They could dismiss me because I didn't have the backing, I wasn't part of a political party or group.

So I saw that it has to be a collective success and it needs a collective strategy. Since I'm not able to do it with these men, I'm going to go and

establish a movement among women. But let me add this. In countries like Syria you don't have a democratic life, you don't have democratic space, or a place for political parties to grow and those that do exist, the people on the ground don't think that they represent them. And I think over the years we have brought the sense that, 'These are not the Syrians that can really make a difference, the real Syrians on the ground need to be brought in' – but it was very difficult for them to be represented.

Now, we have had some success at the local level, and I'm very interested in hearing from you if there was a tradition of a community level organisation and representation because I know that this is a very specific feature of Irish society, and I'm trying to see why it's like this, and whether it was the conflict that made it happen? I'd also like to hear how you got into this kind of work.

Dawn: In some ways, I just stumbled upon it. My first job was with an organisation that specialised in providing grants from European funds, the very first peace programmes that came into Northern Ireland. I'd always had a passion for justice, and as I grew into that role, I found out a little bit more about the wider issues and what happened in communities that were different from my own. Some of them were fighting for their community, sometimes against others within their community, or the state agencies, the police. There were widespread issues of social injustice and discrimination, and I really felt that I could play a part through the funding that we were able to allocate. And it grew from there.

Since then I've become more and more passionate about trying to support particularly working class communities, that always feel the brunt of the policies and the deprivation and discrimination that they face. Those have been exacerbated by the conflict that has been going on in Northern Ireland and, while it's 23 years since the signing of the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement, which for me wasn't really a peace accord but a political agreement that led to the cessation of violence, there's still huge issues that divide us. I need to have a lot of other conversations to try and raise awareness of the tensions and the issues that are there at the moment, and of how fragile the peace is because, while there's been relative stability, and there hasn't been the same violence as at the height of the Troubles, if you scratch below the surface it won't be long in coming up. At the moment, we're facing probably the most difficult period that we have had in the last 15-20 years in Northern Ireland and I fear that in the next few months we will see again the violence that we saw at Easter, but on a wider scale and for a longer period.

So, there is frustration in feeling that, 23 years on, we should be further ahead than we are, and at the same time, some communities feel the pain and the injustices today as strongly as they did 20, 30 or 40 years ago and it's about using the influence that we have in the Community Foundation to really address the weaknesses in policies made by those

who don't see or understand the communities that they think their policy is trying to support.

Bassma: Do you encounter among the communities a sense of despair, do *you* lose hope at some points and wonder if not only are you not making progress, you are going backwards? Do you sometimes say 'why do I work in this business, can't I go and work in something else?'

Dawn: I could never get away from the feeling that I have of, 'If you can help then you should help', and that's really what drives me. At the moment, there is a bit of sadness that the tensions are so high today, but it also drives me on because there's always a way that we can try and help to minimise those tensions, and create the space for others to have the conversations that they need to have, because we're just trying to enable. Those that are right at the front line, those grassroots activists, whenever we're in a crisis, the backbone of our communities, they're the ones that need the help and support.

Bassma: You have a set of values - democratic safe spaces, human security, peace - that you want to instil in communities, but do you encounter the reverse and how do you work with that?

Dawn: You're absolutely right, there are groups that we're working with that are still very opposed to the peace agreements and still feel that conflict is the way to achieve their objectives and for me that makes those hard-line organisations and individuals particularly important to engage with, because if we isolate them from our discussion, we're not bringing all of society along with us and we're storing up problems for future generations. We will support work that helps organisations and individuals to have discussions, particularly with those that are most opposed to the conflict to try and understand where they're coming from, and to help them articulate their ideology, but in a peaceful way, and where possible, through a democratic process. But first, you have to make that engagement, and then build up the relationship from there.

Part of the problem at the moment is that we have political parties that are promoting an agenda of exclusion and they're excluding those voices that would be most hard-line, which is just feeding the tensions. It's not moving us forward, it's pulling us back. It's frustrating that some of those political parties haven't learned the lessons of the last 40 years, which is partly what has got us into the difficulties we are in. You can't achieve peace if you exclude those voices that are most on the margins. That's not peace.

Barry: It's really interesting that despite being in very different parts of the world, you both have a problem which is not really understood or recognised by the rest of the world, so not much progress is being made. I remember a comment that Martin [Macwan] made when he was talking about the Dalits in India: they were trying to move from two steps forward and four steps back, to three steps forward and four steps back. This is not an easy task but you keep going even though the prospects for breakthrough look slim and the political parties around it

actually seem to be as much a part of the problem as part of the solution.

I'd like to bring other people in with questions and comments. Ata[llah Kuttab] you're from the region, how do you see Syria and the struggles there?

Ata: On a voluntary basis I advise 13 youth groups from Syria and I happened to be on a call with a youth group from Latakia today and I agree with you, Bassma, that the politicians are living in their own world, designing their own systems of exclusion - but those young people are innovative in creating spaces.

Second, it's amazing how much they can work together when they have a common cause. Of course conflict will come up again somewhere, but at least they have been able to create the space in which they can breathe and do things in their own community, and they have managed to do so without or even in spite of, the government.

One comment I have is that we don't have the option not to work on this. It's part of who we are, so whether we like it or not, we are pulled in because for me, as a Palestinian, it defines my life. I cannot accept that my end identity is being second class, or in our case 10th class in my homeland.

We are comfortable discussing peace when there is war, but actually we need to define the levels of conflict. It's like an onion, there are layers, and sometimes we fail to define those levels of conflict, so we can't tackle them and create peace at every level. Conflict might come up once we go through one layer to another, and the clearest case of that is what we saw a month ago when there was an attack by Israelis on Gaza. All of a sudden people are talking about making peace between Palestinians and Israelis, as if there was a new state of hostilities, but actually attacks on Palestinians have been going on since 1948, and maybe our mistake as Palestinians is that we haven't defined that level of conflict which needs to be tackled. And within the Palestinian community, too, there are layers of conflict whether it has to do with women's rights, whether it has to do with incompetence of politicians. There is a combination of conflicts that sometimes we oversimplify under the theme of peace. My question to Dawn and Bassma is, are we doing enough to really systematically go through those layers of conflict, and decide when to neutralise certain levels? I don't think we are doing enough analysis of this question.

Barry: Anybody like to comment on that?

Tamzin: Many years ago, I met the guy who started the Global Peace Institute. He commits a lot of money to development in Africa, and one of the things he noticed is that actually the commitment to *non*-peace was far more lucrative, and was undermining peacebuilding efforts. To some extent we're still learning the layers of the onion, but in

different places, are there institutions invested in 'not peace' and how do we bring that into this conversation and try to deal with it?

Chandrika: I have a question that speaks to what Dawn, Bassma and Ata all said. The trauma that individuals experience in conflict situations doesn't go away. Does that feed into the feeling of conflict at the community level? What have been the strategies of healing and addressing trauma, especially in places of overt or hidden conflict and what has been your experience of them?

Jon: A couple of things that have really struck me. You talked about narratives and alongside that is the need for unity amongst those who are working to bring about some form of transformation. How do you build a unified narrative, without which – if I understand correctly – it's difficult to work at any level, whether it's international or in the community?

Dawn, you talked about the need to support frontline activists and I know, Bassma, from the work that you've been doing in Syria that that is a real issue there as well. So how do you go about supporting those frontline activists?

I also had a question about extremes and marginalisation, because Dawn you talk about needing to continue dialogue with extremists, but also about marginalisation and the voices that aren't heard. Are the groups in those two elements the same or different?

Barry: Dawn, would you like to respond to some of that?

Dawn: On Ata's comment about the layers of conflict, the honest answer is no, I don't think that we have done enough to understand those layers and what's happening within them. If we had done that, we wouldn't be in some of the difficulties in Northern Ireland that we're in now. It's something we need to constantly watch because there is a generational aspect to those issues. I was talking on Thursday night [in the We Contain Multitudes conversation] about how children who were born following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement 23 years ago, particularly in working class communities most affected by the conflict, never saw the Troubles, but they recount stories that have happened to others as if they were there at the time, so there's a lot of generational trauma, and a lot of conflict within families as well. We haven't done enough there to try and break that down.

Tamzin mentioned 'non-peace' and if I think about that from a Northern Ireland perspective it would be those whom we call dissidents, dissident republicans or dissident loyalist organisations, that as I said feel that their way to have their viewpoint heard is through some form of violent conflict. Again, our job is to support organisations that are in a place to have those conversations, to try and build up those relationships, to try and understand where it is that they're coming from, and to show how their views can be expressed without resorting to violence.

But part of the problem is the political vacuum. There isn't a party that they feel can express them democratically, and so it's trying to find other ways in which they feel that their voice can be heard.

On your question about strategies for healing, Chandrika, we've never gone in saying 'We know the answer'. We have gone in with an attitude of listening, trying to understand what some of the issues are that individuals and small community organisations are facing and then working up to the wider community and society. A lot of this is about listening; it's coming in without the agenda to support and to enable the community voice to come through, to acknowledge that there have been things that have happened that were wrong and to try and raise those issues where you can and to be that enabler. So we're not trying to fit the issue around the criteria for a funding programme, we're saying 'Forget about the criteria, tell us what the issues are and we will see how we can best support you and work through those'. You just need to take time and space to build those relationships, to understand what's happening within the community and to help them build the confidence to advocate for themselves and then together develop a programme that they think is going to provide some of the solutions to the issues that they're facing.

It is also about being that critical friend. I'm not going to say every conversation you have with a community is easy – they're hard conversations! There are times when we have to try to push people and show that there are other ways in which things can be done, but you can only have those critical conversations once you've built the relationships. So those relationships are just key, and the trust and confidence that people have in you allows you to start addressing some of the hurt that has been caused, within and between communities.

One of your questions. Jon, was about how to support frontline activists. For us, it's saying 'Tell us what you think you're going to need, and let us work together to see how we can support that' – through financial aid, through influencing and lobbying, through connecting them with others. And the other thing is just being flexible, because a couple of months into a project, as you know, the context can change drastically and you need to be able to say 'OK, this is what you started out doing, but if that's not going to work let's look at that again.' If you're not flexible in allowing for that, then you miss out on the possibility of a much richer project.

And your question of marginalisation and extremism. There's a fine line between the two of them. I think that those that are most extreme are also those that are feeling most marginalised, and for me the bottom line is trying to find a way to engage with them at a pace, and within a space and with people that they feel most comfortable, that can challenge them and that can try to slowly move them along a path of peace and transformation.

Barry: It strikes me listening to you, Dawn, you're bringing trust into a system where trust is the lowest order of priority for a lot of people, and that's why this is so tough. Bassma, do you want to respond to that series of questions?

Bassma: I'll start with my experience of bringing support to activists on the ground. A group of us was asked to distribute humanitarian aid inside Syria and it was a fascinating exercise to identify these people and build a network of trust, and through them provide the support. The approach was, 'Never mind what they want to do, we are supporting the right people and they know best what is needed in their community'. I can only do two things. One is, promise to carry their voice to the outside world, and visit them on the ground because they feel so isolated that the fact that you visit them and talk to them, and tell them what is happening outside and where is the source of hope, and what to look for realistically, is important. And it was amazing how realistic people were. I was telling them some very hard realities- that they probably wouldn't be happy with whatever agreement was finally reached and that we would have to deal with that. And they were very understanding of everything I was saying, even on taboo issues.

But I want to reply with a question to Ata's question about the different layers in an onion. Is it a question of methodology? Are we, as people who have some experience in different conflicts, able to bring to the issue the sort of approach that would work? Maybe we can bring that rational sequencing of what needs to happen, where step 1, leads to step 2, step 2 to step 3 and so on, but I sometimes feel that people resist that sort of approach, so I wonder if a more organic process is preferable, where the different layers not one by one, but one affecting the other in ways that we cannot control, predict or teach?

This brings up other questions for me. At what layer are we addressing people? Take your Latakia example, Ata. Latakia is a city under government control with communities from both the regime side and the opposition side, and obviously Ata's talking about people who are not necessarily 'opposition'. But I must say, I feel closer to the moderates on the other side, than to the hardliners on my own side. Do I have to talk to them, Dawn? Do I still have to engage their hopelessly sectarian, conservative backward thinking? Is it not better to put my energy into building the moderates at the centre, bringing those closer and then the more hard-line will come on board eventually. I don't know because we haven't built that centre, but I feel the only way forward is to create a coalition of moderates on both sides.

Tamzin's question immediately takes me to the example of South Africa, where you had wise leaders with a vision and they carried authority. But all of the countries in my region have leaderless movements. There are young activists but they are deprived of the right leaders, because they have either been killed or are in prison or have not arisen. And my feeling is the only way is to talk to ordinary people about their deep sense of belonging to a country or community and therefore the need to

protect or save this community, irrespective of all the differences that arise and the outside interference otherwise why would they be engaged in this conflict in the first place, why wouldn't they just walk away? If you talk to people about that, my feeling is that there is a space, but it's underground, you have to go and reach for it. It doesn't apply to the Israel-Palestine situation, that's a different story, but it does apply here. And I know it worked for Libya for example, calling on this deep sense of belonging to a country. Suddenly people were afraid of partition and that they would lose their sovereignty, lose their country. And so I come to a point where I say, I want democracy and I want a just peace, but if I don't have a just peace, what is it that is even more important? It's to save the country, it's to make sure Syria continues to exist as Syria, and that takes me to other options in terms of a solution. My group would say 'You are moving away from all our principles', but if that's the only way, I'm ready to go for it, and that's where I feel the connection can happen.

Barry: Any more questions?

Martin: One thing I have very positively learned from Bassma is because the politicians and the parties don't represent the community in an effective way, there is a fertile ground which can be used to get more leaders who *can* actually represent people. The question is how do we do it?

My second question, drawing on Bassma's observation, is that there has to be a collective space and a collective strategy, there is no shortcut to that. How do we actually collectivise the experience of people across the globe?

Finally, is it possible to have faith in peace?

Barry: Final words, Dawn?

Dawn: I think the majority of people are committed to the peace process in Northern Ireland, but it is based on a political agreement and on the unionist side, there's a great sense of anger and betrayal towards the UK government for the protocol that was agreed and is now being implemented. They feel it's undermining their identity and sense of belonging, which we talked about as being so important. And the Irish government is saying on the one hand that it supports a peace process, and yet on the other, senior ministers are saying that we need to prepare for a united Ireland which increases the sense of pressure and unease among the unionist community. These developments have eroded trust and confidence, which makes the job of community activists and the community organisations that we're trying to support even harder. Any call for commitment to peace is welcome, but at the moment, if those calls came from a UK or an Irish government they would not be welcomed in the same way as they would have done previously.

Barry: Thank you. Bassma?

Bassma: I'd like to make a comment about human dignity. The slogan of the demonstrators in the early days of the uprising was, 'We want our dignity. This is the uprising or the revolution of dignity'. And the answer from the dictatorship was, 'We are going to punish you to the point where you will feel like animals, because you dared to rebel'. With that goes the health system, the education system. Ninety per cent of the population is dependent on humanitarian aid now, so it is absolutely disastrous. Although people will not show a sense of despair, it's a very strong feeling. How much worse can it get and how long can it last?

To get back to Martin's point, the real question for the countries of the region is how to bring together the positive ones who have the will and the means to make peace and structure them other than in a political party because they're reluctant to get involved in a political party that immediately has a hierarchy? How do they organise to become a collective and be heard as a collective, talk to a government, engage in a dialogue. This is our biggest challenge – today and for the years to come – to confront the radicals, the ones who are against peace, the ones who want a conservative exclusionary society? I must say we have not succeeded until now. I'll leave it at that disappointing answer!

Barry: What is not disappointing is that notwithstanding all of the difficulties in your way, you are both so committed to this struggle. Without people like you, we wouldn't just lose, we'd lose big time. You're actually holding off the worst effects of the forces of decay and profit and in some cases downright evil that beset us.

So thank you for sharing your stories with us. As we get this kind of material out there, I think people will begin to take notice, because one of the things that frustrates me deeply about Northern Ireland particularly is the low understanding on this side of the Irish sea of what is going on and what is at stake. And no one expected in 2011 Syria to get into this descent into hell that it has, it was so mishandled as you say, through a process of punishing the population for just wanting their rights.

So, we'll be back with more. Peacebuilding is a long-term process, we can't give it up, that's the key message that's come out today.

To become part of the FFP learning community or to find out more about its work, please contact Chandrika Sahai at chandrika@global-dialogue.org or Rasha Sansur at infoffpn@gmail.com