

## Peace Is More Important Than Tea

*“When two people relate to each other and hardly experience conflict, either one is a fool or the other is a hypocrite.”* Who among us does not have to deal with conflict? Anyone here not to agree that where human beings interact with each other in a sincere and meaningful way, their interests are at times likely to collide and to stir up emotions?

Based on that line of thinking, but also in an effort to address more than just interpersonal conflict issues in our target area of Nyeri, the CPS<sup>1</sup>-funded team of PeaceNet Kenya just recently concluded an intensive series of six very interactive trainings. For three days each, “Conflict Transformation” was thus at center stage with various groups representative of the local civil society. Seeing themselves continuously challenged by resource and political conflict, property succession, domestic violence and (among many others) the consequences from poverty, substance abuse and crime, a total of 100 or so participants thankfully engaged with us.

*“One word, once said – it will never come back to you”* formed the entry point to day one’s topic of “Nonviolent Communication”, as taught by Marshall B. Rosenberg. The said concept is based on two principal realisations: a) that even (and often) the most highly escalated conflicts can be traced back to the way we talk to each other, and b) that such verbal communication can, if one is conscious about it and willing to learn, be made much more constructive and inclusive. So we shared and practiced things like Active Listening, “I-messages”, Anger Management or the assertive yet non-offensive expression of one’s own needs. Our participants swiftly related these new concepts to their individual “life realities” and were keen to learn more – until we almost skipped an actually scheduled tea break. This because, as one of them declared, ***“peace is more important than tea”***...

What comes spontaneously to your mind when hearing the word... “Chinese”? “Muslim”? “Policeman”? Stereotyping somehow leads to the opposite of inclusive communication, and so our participants made some rather worrying discoveries about themselves when pressured for answers. And how do you handle a possible conflict with your neighbour? Again, people freely spoke their minds (think outside the box...!), with insightful, witty and often enough funny replies ranging from “hugging” to “shooting him”.

The need and potential for a third-party intervention (hopefully well in time before shooting breaks out...) lead us to the topic of day two, “Mediation”. Alternating with healthy doses of theoretical background, we managed to engage our groups in lively role plays. And what great potential of talented acting this came with! Based on our “script” of an escalated conflict in one of Nyeri’s rural neighbourhoods, the two main adversaries could either come calm and composed or enraged and ready to (almost physically) attack – or anything in between, depending on individuals taking them on. On the other hand, and aside from some rather entertaining acting, we also saw great potential in a good number of our inspiring “mediators”.

But how come that, speaking of “potential”, quite a few of our participants were rather skeptical when asked for the practical applicability of mediation as a peace-building tool in the Kenyan (i.e. their very own) context? The answer came somehow surprising: Because it would be

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<sup>1</sup> Civil Peace Service

difficult to find a truly non-partisan “neutral”, i.e. an individual who could equally be trusted with such a responsible task by either side. Trust building therefore seems to be the order of the day!

In any case, diverging opinions were very much welcome in our trainings, given their very participatory design and the striking diversity of groups we worked with: From farmers to elders, from small-scale entrepreneurs to women and youth and people from rather “ordinary” or unique walks of life – they all blended in to make it a healthy mix. Accordingly, the third day of each training was reserved for very specific, almost tailor-made conflict transformation approaches. So for a group of forest users (residing on the slopes of Mt. Kenya), for instance, we would invite an external resource person to give input on their rights and responsibilities, in order to prevent conflict with others or to contain conflict with wildlife. Likewise for our group of entrepreneurs or “IDPs<sup>2</sup> and host communities” – each of them given what we hoped could help them grow more sustainable and conflict-sensitive. In other words: With our combined efforts, we believe that these six trainings (as tiring as they at times were...) have planted some good seeds of peace.

Remember that Nyeri hosts the cradle of the global Scouts movement? It was none less than its founder Baden Powell who had, after he had fallen in love with it, propagated: “*The nearer to Nyeri the nearer to bliss*”. Well, we are tempted to add: Nearer to Nyeri – nearer to peace!

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**Not quite ready for "Reconciliation": role play actors**



**Opening slide of Nyeri training**



**Engaged discussions, (almost) no tea break**



**Not just a theory: Nonviolent Communication**

<sup>2</sup> Internally displaced persons