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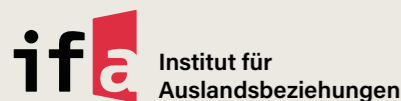
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THE FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT "CONTACT"
IMPLEMENTED BY OWEN E.V IN PARTNERSHIP
WITH PEACE DIALOGUE NGO.



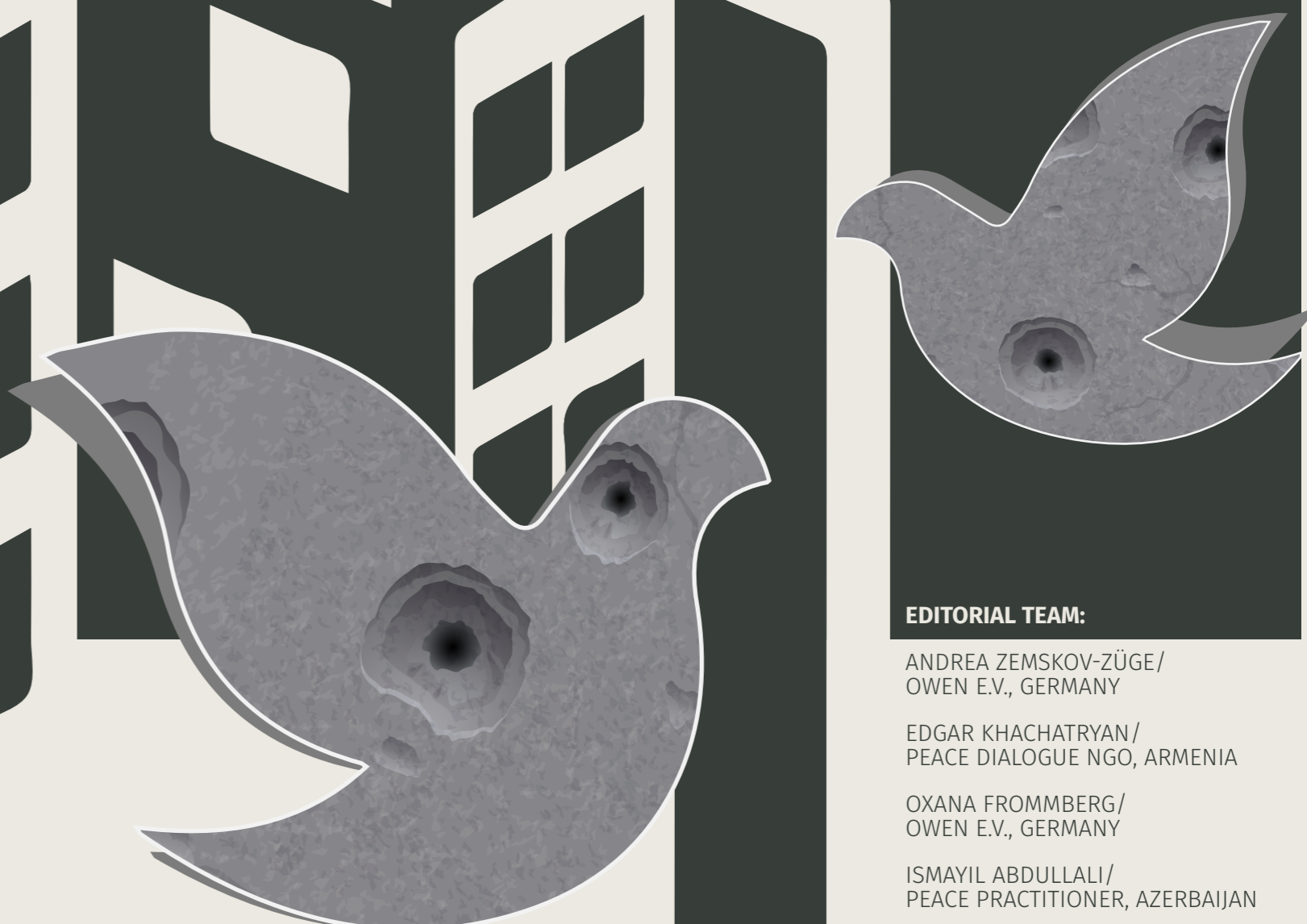
THE PROJECT IS SUPPORTED BY THE ZIVIK
(CIVIL CONFLICT RESOLUTION) PROGRAMME
OF THE INSTITUTE FOR FOREIGN CULTURAL
RELATIONS (IFA) WITH MEANS FROM
THE GERMAN FEDERAL FOREIGN OFFICE.

VANADZOR/BAKU/BERLIN
2022

PEACEBUILDING?!

PERSPECTIVES OF ARMENIAN AND
AZERBAIJANI PEACE PRACTITIONERS

INSIGHTS FROM THE "CONTACT" PROJECT



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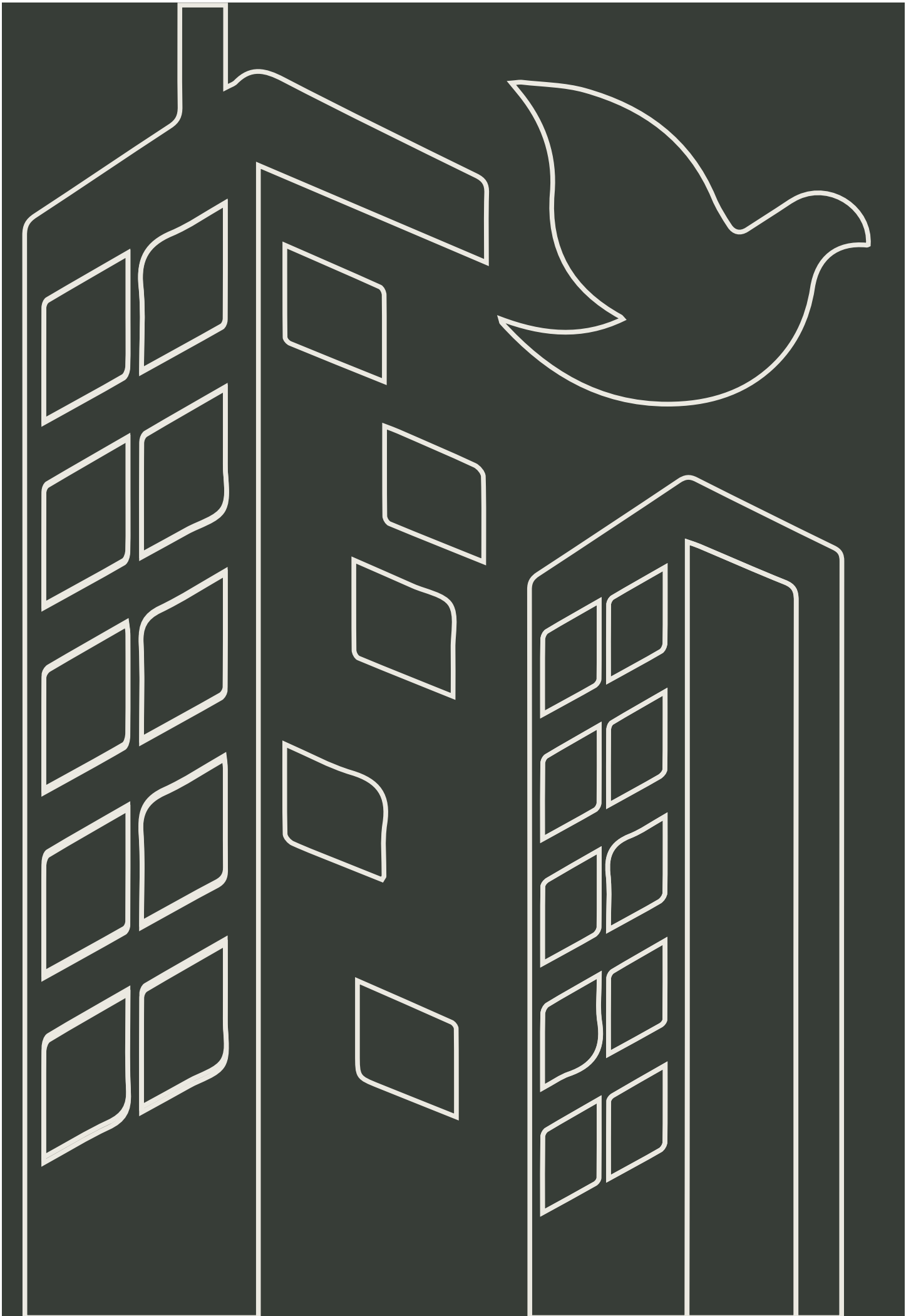
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Federal Foreign Office

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CONTACT - IN TIMES OF WAR

When war starts, the peace building community and activists are confronted with doubts whether their work was at all meaningful and could have prevented the conflict from escalating. These doubts come from the activists themselves and also from their societies. Military force appears to be the only means of guaranteeing security; the commitment to dialogue and civil society participation in shaping peace orders appear naive and oblivious - in some cases even as a betrayal of national interests.

Today peace organizations and activists in Armenia and Azerbaijan are under high pressure. On the political level they're struggling between marginalization and the danger of being captured by political interests. Their political leverage is rather small, squeezed between national power games and, as in the case of Azerbaijan, a rather hostile attitude toward civil society as a whole. For the activists, it is difficult to assert themselves as independent political actors. They suffer from isolation and speechlessness towards their own societies.

In Armenia, under the impression of ongoing ceasefire violations in the border regions peace building seems to have failed and dialogue with Azerbaijan is deemed undesirable by the majority of society. In Azerbaijan, where the mood is victorious and peacebuilding is accepted as a building block for stabilizing the new order, it is difficult to create discursive spaces for peace that go beyond this superficial understanding and enable self-critical reflection. Given this reality, the international donor community's calls for more cross-border dialogue and confidence building measures seems to be ignoring a crucial point: the readiness for dialogue within the societies that needs to be prepared first.

In this situation of great uncertainty and disillusionment within the peace building community, we started the "CONTACT" project in September 2020. The second project period was already planned under the circumstances of the ongoing war. Nevertheless, it was difficult to foresee which challenges we would meet. When starting with the second round in early summer 2021, soon it became clear that the 44 days war meant a clear caesura for our work. It was impossible to continue according to the project plan. Ignoring our doubts and insecurities, even together, was also impossible. Despite the challenges, we decided to venture the experiment, to explore together what was possible under the new circumstances and to reflect upon the questions to which there were no more answers. Through our work we wanted to develop a deeper understanding of the local situations and the needs of the people on the ground. To understand **'WHAT IS POSSIBLE AT**

ALL?’ was a guiding question for our work and the internal reflection. Our strong and trustful partnerships, built up in years of peacebuilding work, that allowed us to negotiate differences and reflect honestly on the process.

The main project idea was to empower young people, mobilize their peacebuilding potential and to support them in their local activism for peacebuilding. For the team it was important to analyze the situation and needs on the ground and to involve conflict-affected communities. We wanted to experiment with new creative approaches developed by the young people and by doing so find out needs, starting points and blind spots for peace building work within the societies.

We started with analytical workshops where young people identified their needs and elaborated their own project ideas. Based on these ideas altogether 8 local initiatives were implemented in Armenia and Azerbaijan. All initiatives used creative methods for working with their local communities, such as trauma and art therapy, working with peace narratives through adapting fairy tales and especially targeting children and young people. During this one year of project implementation, we were amazed by the motivation of young people to contribute to peace building within their societies, despite the difficult situation. We also learned about the prospects and limitations of our work.

In this publication we would like to reflect on the situation of peacebuilders in Armenia and Azerbaijan and to show the local voices on the ground. Finalizing this project, we did not find answers to all our doubts and questions, but by sharing our experience we hope to highlight some crucial points, that contribute to the efforts for peace building in the region.

THE SITUATION OF CSOs ON THE GROUND

PERSPECTIVES OF ACTIVISTS AND PEACE ORGANIZATIONS IN ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN



“...Peace, first of all, is the absence of war. It comes most probably from my context, and the environment where I live. But also, peace is when a person does not feel constantly intimidated but protected both in terms of security and law. All this is peace for me...”¹

27-year-old female peace activist from Armenia



“...Absence of hatred towards representatives of other nations, absence of traumatic feelings towards one another, absence of revanchist feelings..., and of course it is the prevalence of the idea that human life is much more valuable than anything else, than territory, than political influence, than reputation...”²

23-year-old female peace activist from Azerbaijan

These quotes from two young women peacebuilders from Armenia and Azerbaijan illustrate the complexity and asymmetry in perceptions of the peacebuilding community in the societies involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The aforementioned ideas were voiced during interviews conducted among 10 young men and women actively involved in the project “CONTACT” and the project team in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The interviews were aimed at exploring the views of the civil society actors on the opportunities and difficulties of their work on the ground after the second³ war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

More than two years after Armenia and Azerbaijan halted their second war over Nagorno-Karabakh, the shape of what will come next and whether a sustainable settlement is at all possible remain unclear. The 44 – day fighting saw Azerbaijan

1. Quotation from interviews with the team of the project “CONTACT” from Armenia and Azerbaijan.

2. Same source.

3. In Armenia, the Armed Conflict that started in 27 September of 2020 between Azerbaijan and Armenia is often called 44-Day War or the Third Karabakh War. The reason is that the Armenian Azerbaijani clashes that lasted for four days back in April of 2016 are largely perceived as a full-scale war.

regain control of about one third of the Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and most of seven adjacent territories that Armenian forces had seized in the first Nagorno-Karabakh war in the 90ies of the last century⁴. The parties are reinforcing positions along a new front line where the armies are positioned within shooting range of each other, near important roads and so close to civilian settlements that *“sleepless villagers say they can hear the talk in the trenches”*⁵.

It seems with so many alternately traumatized or triumphant after the fighting, the climate is not propitious for dialogue, urgently needed to resolve post-war problems, let alone the question of Nagorno-Karabakh’s status that lies at the heart of the conflict.

The processes of civil society formation (in an academic sense) in Armenia and Azerbaijan started simultaneously after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 90s of the last century. However, the dynamics of its development in Armenia and Azerbaijan went through different trajectories, especially after 2015. Back then, the Azerbaijani government has adopted several restrictive amendments to legislation regulating NGO operation. Many international donor organizations were banned in Azerbaijan. Those who were still allowed to work in the territory of Azerbaijan, were forced to follow the new procedures of the Cabinet of Ministers, requiring issuance of grants with prior approval solely from the government. Moreover, the new rules granted broad powers to the Ministry to inspect and penalize civil society organizations. The aforementioned policy of the Azerbaijani government, that overall duplicated the Russian government’s ‘Foreign Agents legislation’, dramatically weakened the positions of the local civil society actors. Many organizations whose loyalty was questioned by the Azerbaijani government were forced to shut down, also simply because their funding opportunities were restricted by the newly espoused rules. Whereas in Armenia, the civil society actors had generally fertile soil for the development of their work and very often the Armenian government had a hard time with local powerful CSOs. Many think that the Velvet Revolution in Armenia in 2018 was a direct and vivid example of the civil society’s great role in fighting the corrupt and autocrat government.

How did the recent war in Nagorno-Karabakh transform the landscape, environment and perceptions of peace activists in the region? Many say that the situation of the Armenian peace activists after the 44-day war is a mirror reflection of the situation of their counterparts from Azerbaijan after the first Karabakh War.

DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF PEACE: DIALOGUE vs. HUMAN SECURITY

Comparing the reflections of peace practitioners involved in the project “CONTACT”

4. ICG BRIEFING N91: Improving Prospects for Peace after the Nagorno-Karabakh War, 22 December, 2020.

5. Citation from the ICG REPORT N264: Post-war Prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh, 9 June, 2021

one can observe an obvious difference in interpretations of the terms ‘PEACE’ and ‘PEACEBUILDING’ by those working on different sides of the conflict line.

When asked **‘what does peace mean to you?’**, one of the Azerbaijani activists said:

“

“Peace means stability, the ability to resolve every issue through dialogue, but at the same time, sincere communication about existing conflicts and disagreements and the ability of the actors, be it in a group, in society, or in a state, to communicate properly about the issues that they do not agree on and the ability to find compromise between them, to find solutions and if the solution is not possible at the moment, the ability to find processes that help to come to a creative resolution of these issues.”

However, Armenian activists often mention personal and, in general, human security and human rights aspects in their interpretation of the term ‘PEACE’ or ‘PEACEBUILDING’. Answering the question **‘what does peacebuilding mean?’**, an Armenian male CSO representative said:

“

“...If I speak in simple human language, creating a favorable environment for me, my friends, family, children, where me, my children, and the society are not in danger...”

He added:

“I want to live in a society where I feel calm. I do not want to take my mobile every morning and read “how many soldiers have been killed or how many kilometers have the troops advanced in each other’s territories ...” I follow the events in Ukraine with the same anxiety...”

The voices of activists operating in territories of Nagorno-Karabakh that are remaining under Armenian control, continue the statements from Armenia.

“

“...Peace is when you can live freely, safe, secure in your homeland, you can live an active life without anxiety, panic and pressure, you can expand your horizons, your family’s well-being and personal life...”

CHANGES IN SOCIETAL PERCEPTIONS OF WAR AND PEACE – ACCEPTANCE OF VIOLENCE

It is noteworthy, that the activists mention significant changes before and after the war in societal perceptions of war, peace, and peacebuilding. Armenian activists indicate the radicalization of discourses, uprisal of nationalist and militaristic sentiments not only in their direct environment but in a larger context, even worldwide, saying that they are very much concerned because “It seems that henceforth, violence will be largely perceived as a legitimate way for resolving conflicts.”

Simultaneously, Azerbaijani activists mention a new trend of ‘careful loyalty’ toward peace ideology in their environment.



“Actually, (...) the perception of peacebuilding before the war and after the war has changed, now the people are more or less curious, I cannot say that they are positive towards peacebuilding but they are curious to understand what peacebuilding means and they are less hostile to the notion of peacebuilding, because before the war thanks to the government propaganda the majority thought that peace means treason and the people involved in peacebuilding are playing against national interests. Now after the war these kinds of narratives have changed. They still exist but there is a wider window of opportunity to operate with society, I guess, it is very fresh and we still are trying to figure it out, but from different signals that we get it seems that there are more opportunities to work.”

NEW ROLES AND STRATEGIES OF ACTIVISTS: RECONCILIATION AND STABILIZATION VS INTERNAL DIALOGUE AND TRAUMA

The above-mentioned perceptions, undoubtedly, shape the roles and define new strategies of the civil society actors involved in peacebuilding activities in the region. For the Azerbaijani activists the hot conflict is over and their actions are aimed at post-war stabilization and reconciliation. The Armenian actors’ efforts are mainly aimed at dealing with the consequences of war and trauma, as well as addressing security threats in case of further escalation of the conflict.



“Basically, the peacebuilders’ reputation contributed from the beginning to their marginalization. And the government, in general, supported this marginalization of the peacebuilders. It is very sad to say, that we did not manage to find our place in order to push forward our ideas at those times. Now, the situation has changed and we have more opportunities, since the government changed their

point of view on this situation and now, they are more interested in peace and stability. But how long might it take to reconfigure the situation that was established in the last 30 years, and to create new channels of communication with society and to ensure, that there are no security issues for peacebuilders and people who are calling for peace. This will take some time,”-

said a male peace activist from Azerbaijan. Another female activist from Azerbaijan emphasizes:

“*...The role of CSOs has not changed dramatically before and after war”.*

According to her, all this time the civil society in Azerbaijan was trying to promote the idea that **‘peace is possible’**.

“Maybe now our civil society is more engaged in trying to create dialogue with the civil society of Armenia, because after the conflict, of course, they are more traumatized, they are not as open for communication as they were before. So probably right now the focus has shifted a little bit towards trying to build bridges with Armenia’s civil society but again with the purpose of showing that it is possible not to end up with war again, that could erupt any time.”

Concerning the role of peacebuilding CSOs after the escalation in 2020, her counterparts from Armenia believe that apart from cross-border dialogue, there is a strong need also for internal dialogue within both societies.

“*I see a new dangerous trend in my surroundings that happened after being defeated in the war. Many say: everyone is bad, the whole world is unfair, no one is paying attention to us, we have always been the victims of this or the victims of that. At the end, all this will make us a bitter nation, offended by everyone, isolated from everyone. This is very dangerous. I see our role in influencing the formation of new identities,” –*

says a male activist from Armenia.

“On the other hand, the society in Azerbaijan, most likely, will soon suffer from a ‘winner’s complex’. This happened to us after the first Karabakh War and until 2020. That complex leads to the ‘primitivisation’ of society, saying, “Our army is the stron-

gest and the most powerful army in the region; We do not pay attention to many things, because “we just won”; Yes, there were war crimes, but we won; Yes, we had thousands of victims, but yet, we won.” However, these “buts” are always important, and it is important to create an alternative to such “buts” for us. That is why our contribution should be the creation of different multi-sectoral dialogue platforms both within the society and between different groups across the conflict lines.”

CHALLENGES FOR PEACE BUILDING – COOPERATION WITH GOVERNMENTS AND DONORS

Remarkably, despite the fact that the Armenian government declared its commitment to the establishment of a new ‘era of peace’ in the region, activists register increasing nationalist sentiments in their surroundings and decreasing space for dialogue with their society.



“My work has become very complicated, the space for discussions with people has decreased, now there are a lot of radical perceptions and moods, that make it difficult to have a dialogue with our own society. In other words, if our mission is to prepare the ground for dialogue, there is no public demand for that work after the outbreak of the conflict,”-

said a female CSO representative from Armenia.

“For example, I feel threatened not only of being criticized, but also being physically and morally attacked. Very often I have to step back to ensure my safety. Besides, I am not relieved by the thought that nothing will change with people as a result of our work. Before the war it was a little easier to talk to people, to start a conversation, now their ideas are even harder, and it is hard to break through to people. I see another problem. I often ask myself: maybe people are right, and I’m wrong. As a result, an internal fight ensues, which often does not allow me to be more courageous, because I still do not understand what is happening.”

Talking about the challenges for the peacebuilding community after the war, activists from Azerbaijan are mainly stressing the critical lack of resources, dependence on decisions of the political elites, as well as raging nationalist sentiments that were propagated by the governments for many years.



“...For the spread of hate-speech the governments spend millions of dollars, but for peacebuilding projects we get so much less than that and with these limited resources we cannot spend as much time as we want to work with people, we cannot reach out to the amount of people we would want to reach. So, first the absence of resources and second, the dependence on official rhetoric. For example, the government is more open to the idea of peacebuilding but we do not know how this will change tomorrow, so we are very much dependent on Track 1⁶ processes. This is very limiting as well, especially in a society like ours.”

The activists also mention that having had a marginalized position in their society for so long has caused a deprivation of civil societies’ capacities, public support and influence.



“...After the 2014 NGO crackdown in Azerbaijan, the overall situation was pretty dire for the CSO, and the main problem was that the donors left as they were not able to provide grants, because of legislation that had been adopted by the government. So local NGO were not able to apply for grants. Without financial support they lost major parts of their capacities and their ability to work with society. So, after 2014 the situation was not very good for the NGOs working in the peacebuilding field or in general with society...”

said an Azerbaijani peace activist.

At the same time, he added that under these circumstances, the role of the international NGOs dramatically increased, because through cooperation with international partners, the local organizations were able to work and operate within the aforementioned unfavorable context.

On the contrary, the Armenian activists highlight the decrease of respect and trust towards many international institutions, or even local peacebuilding NGOs among the larger public. Largely this is explained by the inactive position of the aforementioned institutions during the 44-days war. Many say:



“It seems that the international bodies that were supposed to nurture and promote peacebuilding, democracy, human rights throughout their activities around the world largely accepted

6. The term “track-one process” refers to official government diplomacy

the violence against the Armenians and the population of Nagorno-Karabakh...”.

At the same time, representatives of the peace community in Armenia mention that in many cases their international partners helped them to overcome the hard times they had during the war and were the only channel for communication with their Azerbaijani counterparts right after the war.

In the communication between the sides, preserving the rare and delicate bonds between individual peacebuilders, that have not yet been destroyed by violence and propaganda, remains a challenge. To achieve this, the contrary needs on both sides must be taken seriously and accommodated. In Azerbaijan this is the need for closure and moving on together with Armenian "allies". On the Armenian side it is the need for introspection, contemplation and healing. How to do that, while including wider parts of both societies is a question, posed to any future "CONTACT" project as well as all efforts to create sustainable peace in the region.

THE “CONTACT” INITIATIVES

AN ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the “CONTACT” framework, young people were given an opportunity to develop and implement peacebuilding initiatives. As a second step, dialogue about these initiatives between civil society actors in Armenia and Azerbaijan was encouraged and facilitated. This process was aimed at addressing two problems that have been indicated above:

1. The **decreased capacity of the peacebuilding community** – through creating an opportunity for young people with little experience in the conflict resolution field to acquire professional skills and knowledge, allowing them to reflect on the situation in their societies, invent and implement initiatives that try to address some of the problems they see;
2. The **need to work with the respective societies** on the grass-root level in order to overcome hatred and stereotypes. “CONTACT” allowed to build a bridge between the peacebuilding communities and their respective societies and incentivize the different groups in Armenia and Azerbaijan to engage in discussion and activities that were directly or indirectly related to the conflict.

One of the strong sides of the “CONTACT” project was the people-centric approach expressed through empowering young activists to choose the target groups that they believed should be involved into peace building processes as well as topics and methods, that they considered effective in terms of their context. As a result of this approach, differences and similarities of the context are reflected also in the initiatives. In the following, after giving some general information, we would like to make three points about the content and effects of the initiatives, conducted in our project.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Altogether, eight initiatives were conducted in the last project cycle (June 2021 – May 2022): three in Azerbaijan, four in Armenia and one in Nagorno Karabakh. All initiatives were implemented by project participants under the mentorship and overview of more experienced young peacebuilders. **Throughout the text, the “CONTACT” initiatives will be introduced in small textboxes to provide some insight into the work “on the ground”.**

The participant groups ranged from preschool children to young adults and students. Various topics were addressed such as the empowerment of young people,

conflict narratives, psychological trauma, cultural violence, peacebuilding theory and others. The project activities also varied broadly. Some of the events covered peace education, others psychological support, focus group discussions, engaging with possible new activists and finding out about their needs, educating small children in nonviolent conflict transformation as well as artistic and literary engagement with conflict narratives, trauma and post war reality.

One important aim in both countries was the introduction of new people into civil society activism, which is crucial for the Azerbaijani civil society weakened by years of institutional barriers, and also for Armenian civil society that has been disoriented and disillusioned after the war.

EXAMPLE 1

THE CREATOR



“Sometimes it was shocking, sometimes quite nice or difficult to hear the opinion of Armenian teenagers and young people. I discovered a range of ideas about violence and how they deal with it. As a whole, we came to the conclusion that we are the source of violence and at the same time the victims of it.”

Location: ARMENIA

Goal: To identify the roots of violence in literature and folklore; to engage young people of the Vanadzor community in peace and war-related discussions and promote critical and self-critical thinking among them.

Participants: 13 students from Lori region.

Project Event: 5 discussions on different pieces of literature including relevant topics; public presentation and discussion on the Armenian translation of Albert Camus’ “Letters to the German friend” epistolary essays which cover topics of war, peace, enemy, victory, etc.

Challenges: To reach an involvement of young people in the activities due to their post-war traumas, insecurity and lack of interest in sensitive topics, such as non-violence and peaceful coexistence after the war.

Outcome: Young students from the local community realized the role of literature in the formation of public perceptions and standards led by reflection and critical analysis of the common beliefs, depicted through literature.

DIFFERENT FOCUS

As the previous analysis clearly shows, the Azerbaijani and Armenian societies experience the consequences of the war in different ways. In Azerbaijan the peacebuilding community, that had already been weakened, was seriously discouraged by the effectiveness of the military gains and now faces rising militarization, nationalism and criticism by the society. In Armenia, the whole society and especially the peacebuilding community has been heavily traumatized and disappointed in ideas of peace and the peacebuilding approach as a whole.

EXAMPLE 2

ALTERNATIVE PEACE



“After this little initiative, it was clear that our little ideas can turn into something real. Especially if you find the right team, and look for collaboration. You sure need to be someone with knowledge and skills.”

Location: AZERBAIJAN

Goal: To raise awareness among Azerbaijani youth on alternative narratives related to peacebuilding and encourage alternative ideas against daily propaganda. To create a resilience among youth against hate speech.

Participants: 12 young people (18-20 y.o)

Project Event: Two day interactive workshops and round tables on peacebuilding.

Challenges: To gain trust and explain participants the main advantages for them to take part in the initiative, to reach efficiency in the given time frames.

Outcome: Group of youth (7 persons) better equipped to face militaristic propaganda and aware about peace narratives.

This difference was expressed also in the focus set by the initiatives in both countries. In Azerbaijan, all three initiatives had the goal to foster the discussion of peace-related issues with representatives of different grassroots communities. Therefore, at the basis of all Azerbaijani initiatives was the idea to teach basics of conflict transformation and peacebuilding to different groups within Azerbaijani society, especially youth and to foster critical thinking and discussions on issues related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in order to strengthen peacebuilding approaches in the domestic discourse. The backside of this was, that this approach sometimes resulted in a more theoretical, even technical engagement with the topic. At the same time, there is great openness and willingness to meet and exchange with the Armenian side.

EXAMPLE 3

DON'T HURT, JUST ART



“This initiative offered the opportunity to feel the war within yourself. I don’t want to speak about big things, like territory or human losses and the pain. I just want to think about who I am during the war and what the war is doing with me, whether I want there to be war and things to happen with me as a result.”

Location: ARMENIA

Goal: Young people gain trust in the concept of non-violence / peacebuilding and are able to speak out about war and violence by using art.

Participants: 16 young people from Lori region

Project Event: Series of painting sessions depicting feelings before, during and after the war, discussions related to conflict, its consequences, the image of the enemy, future possibilities of co-existence.

Challenges: Reluctant involvement of young people in the activities due to their post-war traumas, insecurity and lack of interest in sensitive topics, such as non-violence and peaceful coexistence after war.

Outcome: The participants approached the post-war reality critically and self-critically, made an attempt to identify the unspoken side of the war with a psychological follow-up.

The Armenian initiatives, on the contrary, focused more on addressing post-war trauma in Armenian society and on studying how the recent escalation affected the local communities. Among the young activists, there was a strong demand to understand the current state of Armenian society, especially youth, in the post-war period, and to identify the problems and traumas that exist among different target groups and to make first attempts to address the damage done by the last war, through the implementation of the initiatives. This resulted in a more practical approach, directed towards the inside, reflecting even psychological effects. It was very touching to see, how the activists themselves had to overcome their frustration with the situation and become active. This made them, at the same time, very empathetic and sensitive to the moods in their target groups and enabled deep and even self-critical reflection.

Altogether, these different approaches offer a great basis for exchange. While one side is more focused on the rational and theoretical implications of peacebuilding, the other side is ready to explore the emotional toll, the conflict demands from the involved societies. It is however the question, how to facilitate such an exchange in a way that enables both sides to grow and inspire each other, rather than one side remaining caught up in introspection, while the other side remains stuck in theoretical reflection.

WORKING WITH NARRATIVES

Activists in both countries experience and critically reflect on the great dominance of conflict narratives. This engagement with narratives is something, that some initiatives on the Armenian and Azerbaijani side have in common. The following questions were vital for some of the initiatives:

- How are children in our culture and society conditioned to follow the dominant narratives?
- What can be changed about their education to inspire nonviolence?
- How can we inspire critical thinking about the conflict in our society?
- What can be done against misinformation, hatespeech and fake news?
- Which role do patriarchal discourses, traditional gender roles and heteronormativity play for the conflict narratives?

From these and similar question stems an engagement with conflict narratives that plays out in different fields: addressing hate speech and propaganda, trying to find and reinforce alternative narratives and even the attempt to formulate alternative narratives, that foster nonviolence and constructive problem solving.

Some initiatives also strove to self-critically reflect on roots of conflict narratives and establish more peaceful ways of speaking about conflicts and sought to overcome the long-lasting lack of discussion over the roots and consequences of the conflict in Azerbaijani and Armenian societies.

An important tool of working with narratives, was to encourage the participants to become creative, themselves and express their own vision and feelings about the conflict, using creative methods such as writing, drawing and analyzing art in order to support young people and inspire them to reflect on their situation and help coping with post-war traumas. Using art as an instrument to work with traumatized groups and children within society proved to be a very successful approach, it allowed to overcome the existing reluctance of local population to engage into the discussions related to peace building and conflict resolution.

EXAMPLE 4

WAR & QUEER



“There are many interest groups, with different standpoints, different positions and different understandings of peace. We need to work with each of these groups, at least in my understanding, so that we can reach sustainable peace. But we should work in transformative ways. I do not think peacebuilding is about appeasing people. So, the additional mission of the peacebuilder is to make transformation possible.”

Location: AZERBAIJAN

Goal: The goal of the project is to understand the effect of the recent 44-day war on the queer community of Azerbaijan, the presentation of alternative queer-centric narratives on conflict as well as creating a new discursive space for discussing the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict.

Participants: 8 LGBTQ+ activists.

Project Event: Online and offline discussions.

Challenges: Finding proper communication with participants and motivating them to participate and share their experience.

Outcome: Raised awareness on queer-centric narratives of the conflict. Group of LGBTQ+ people involved into discussion over peace narratives.

To conclude it should be emphasized, that approaches and topics of analyzing and using narratives for conflict transformation has in no way been exhausted in the “CONTACT” project. A broad range of topics, tools and approaches are still available and ready to be discovered and experimented with. Here, we see a worthwhile and interesting field of engaging with the own societies and with activists from the other side.

EXAMPLE 5

ALTERNATIVE PEACEFUL FAIRY TALES



“To explore a methodology of working with children to create peaceful fairy tales has been a great experience for me. I have found something I really love doing.”

Location: ARMENIA

Goal: To teach conflict resolution by peaceful means, to develop an understanding of conflict transformation through fairy tales among children and adults.

Participants: 12 children aged 3-6 from Lori region and local activists and artists.

Project Event: Drawing sessions for creating fairy tales with children; writing down the fairy tales created by/with the children.

Challenges: to come up with a methodology of creating peaceful fairy tales with children and overcoming the disappointment after the war, as well as enduring the fragility of current peacebuilding processes.

Outcome: Group of children and adults involved in the process of creation of the peaceful fairy tales; development of methodology and creation of fairy tales based on the children’s ideas of conflict and its resolution.

REACHING OUT TO THE (CONFLICT) REGIONS

In order to influence the conflict system as a whole, of course it is vital to include people from Nagorno-Karabakh and the bordering regions. This is, however, not an easy task since the consequences of the war are very much present in these regions. Nevertheless, the team has succeeded in conducting initiatives in Nagorno Karabakh and Aghdam, close to the Armenian border.

EXAMPLE 6

DEVELOPING ADAPTIVE MECHANISMS OF IDP CHILDREN



“The initiative was perceived in Nagorno-Karabakh in a very positive tone. For us it means a lot that non-NK organizations invest here, especially in terms of psychological support. We have a kind of feeling that we are not alone here with our pain.”

Location: NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Goal: To evaluate the adaptation of IDP children to the new environment (14-17 years old) to Stepanakert, to identify those minors who suffer from disadaptation and form therapeutic groups to raise their adaptation level.

Participants: 38 students in the age group of 14-17.

Project Event: Conducting a preliminary assessment and implementing therapeutic meetings with the groups.

Challenges: The group has passed the development stages, but the number of meetings was not enough to take an in-depth insight of all the relevant issues and occurrences that have been deciphered.

Outcome: The main problems related to the process of adaptation and integration of displaced persons have been identified and addressed.

Important aims of these initiatives were attempting to include disadvantaged groups whose position and vision on conflict related discourse is usually misrepresented, such as schoolchildren and youth from Karabakh and also to address urgent issues of psychological support to help address trauma. The utterly sensitive environment and existing strong reluctance within society to engage in projects and initiatives related to peace building, required flexibility and creative approaches from the young activists and experts, involved in the implementation.

EXAMPLE 7

YAZAR



“Children usually do not have established value systems. So if we work from childhood, we can better cultivate a culture of peace. This is the aspect, I am now focusing on.”

Location: AZERBAIJAN

Goal: To raise awareness about conflict and peace narratives and peacebuilding, to encourage children to share their views.

Participants: 15 school children (age 10- 12 y.o).

Project Event: Series of interactive workshops on peacebuilding.

Challenges: To gain trust and support from parents, to cope with the difficult working environment in the immediate conflict region.

Outcome: 15 essays on peace, written by schoolchildren.

Especially in Azerbaijan, the contrast between the capital and the rural regions is enormous. This is of course even more true for those regions, that have been severely affected by the war. Also, this difference, makes it more difficult for young activists from Baku to gain access and be heard by the rural population. At the same time, young people in the regions, during the course of the initiatives, have shown to be quite open to reflect critically and challenge stereotypes and concepts of the enemy.

EXAMPLE 8

NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR REVEALING THE PEACEBUILDING POTENTIAL OF YOUTH



“The initiative enables us to gain a better understanding of what resources are available, who we are dealing with and where we can start our work. That is, this study provides some access to community youth while taking steps towards peace.”

Location: ARMENIA

Goal: To understand the main interests and needs, as well as, to reveal the potential of young people from the Lori region who can subsequently be involved in peacebuilding-related activities.

Participants: 49 young people from different communities of Lori region.

Project Event: 6 focus group discussions in 5 communities of Lori region.

Challenges: Engaging people in discussions, and helping them to overcome their discouragement from recent war and the lack of confidence in the fact that their concerns and opinions might be taken into consideration.

Outcome: Identifications of the needs and concerns of the youth and assessment of the peacebuilding-potential.

Working in the regions has shown, that it is not so easy for many young people in both Armenia and Azerbaijan to perceive themselves as political subjects, capable of influencing their environment and shaping the future in a way, that accommodates their hopes and dreams.

These realizations have strengthened the project team in its objective to empower and encourage young people to reflect on their goals and dreams, challenge propaganda and hatespeech and strive for change. Implementing own small initiatives, organizing events, managing finances, choosing topics and engaging an audience is a fruitful way of empowering youth and fostering their skills.

Altogether, the small scope and short duration of the initiatives made it possible to engage in an experimental way with different groups of the involved societies. The creativity, that was shown by all activists in developing and conducting the initiatives was remarkable. Also, the initiatives proved to be a good subject for dialogue between the sides. It set the frame to very practical issues and gave room for seeing differences and commonalities in the respective societies, without the pressure of positioning oneself in relation to the conflict.

This is true, for the immediate conflict regions as well as the Armenian Lori region, further away from the line of contact.

REMARKS FOR THE FUTURE

Implementing the “CONTACT” project during and after the war made it necessary to re-evaluate the political and social situation in Armenia and Azerbaijan even more intensely than in other projects and contexts. The project team needed to develop a new understanding about opportunities and limitations under the new realities. By frequently analyzing the situation and adapting the project step by step, while conducting workshops and initiatives, our team members have come to some conclusions, that will be subsumed here. Partly, they concern the societal environment and the general situation of civil society in both countries and in relation to each other. Other, more specific conclusions concern the implementation of initiatives.

Following the observations throughout project implementation, recommendations will be presented here.

REVERSION OF ROLES IN THE CONFLICT SYSTEM

The outcome of the war has reversed the former relationship between the conflict parties. While the Armenian society perceives the current situation as ongoing escalation and therefore sees security needs as their foremost priority, in Azerbaijan, a spirit of victory prevails and has led to a more lenient, somewhat condescending attitude towards the Armenian side in which dialogue to a certain extent is politically desirable. This is a reversion of the pre-war relations, where Armenians were generally more prone to dialogue, than their Azerbaijani counterparts. Of course, this reluctance on the Armenian side today, is related to threats of further violence from the side of the Azerbaijani government.

In the project initiatives, these different roles were reflected in more hands-on practical and creative approaches which the Armenian team developed in addressing immediate consequences the war had caused in their own communities. In Nagorno-Karabakh, trauma healing was even the main purpose of the initiative. The Azerbaijani team chose more theoretical approaches to address the interest in learning about conflict and contacting with the other side, which they perceived in their peers.

Since the roles have been reversed, there is a deep understanding about the processes in the respective other society, that shape the current discussion in each of the societies. Armenian actors analyze the Azerbaijani victory mood based on their own experiences as former “winners” of the conflict. At the same time, while

wishing for dialogue, the Azerbaijani actors have a deep understanding for the dialogue reluctance on the Armenian side. This “change of roles” creates opportunities to apply to empathy and point out on the changes in the roles to representatives of both sides. It is, however not an established fact, rather a potential tool that peacebuilders may use in the future.

In settings, involving different sides, one cannot let oneself be subsumed only by the needs of either side. It is crucial to try and find a compromise between the need for contact on the Azerbaijani side and the Armenian need for introspection, as well as the need to overcome immediate consequences of violent conflict among conflict-affected populations from Karabakh (and surroundings). The idea of practical engagement as a basis for exchange has proven successful to spark interest and inspire reflection inside and between the conflict parties.

OVERCOMING THE CRISIS BY ENGAGING WITH THE SOCIETIES

After the war, a current crisis of the „Peacebuilding Paradigm“ has occurred, that had been affecting the work in the region under the surface already before the immediate escalation. The Ukraine war has tipped the scale in favor of militarization and has contributed to a widespread perception, that violence is inevitable. This is reflected also in military spending that has been significantly raised everywhere. Together with increasing nationalistic tendencies in Armenia and Azerbaijan, the militarization poses a threat to democracy and human rights. Instead, the “right” of the strongest seems unavoidable these days. Peace activists everywhere hear such concerns and it is difficult to find answers.

Mistrust against peacebuilding approaches affect all actors in both societies, that stand by the values of nonviolence, human rights and democratic development. It contributes to their isolation and forces them to constantly justify themselves and their activities. Interventions must be planned carefully on the base of needs assessment. Including the most vulnerable conflict affected groups in each society and regaining their trust. The crisis of the Peacebuilding notion cannot be overcome theoretically. It takes practical hands-on approaches to convince those, affected most by war and violence.

Peacebuilders and activists must take the crisis of the peacebuilding notion as a chance to step into dialogue with the societies and develop interventions and methods, that are based on their needs. This will increase the relevance of the developed tools and can create new acceptance for methods as well as the actors representing them.

Donors should support very practical initiatives that strive for close contact with grassroots people in both countries and concentrate on finding out what is needed on the ground.

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS FOR DIFFICULT PROBLEMS

While the readiness for dialogue differs strongly between the sides, the team has met an equally lively interest in developing and conducting initiatives, engaging with the own societies on both sides. Experiencing the own potential in initiating change is perceived as a remedy against feelings of hopelessness and despair. This is especially true for Armenia. After the end of the 44-day war, people were disoriented, experiencing personal identity and security crises. The opportunity to develop initiatives answered to a need to become active and start finding solutions to immediate problems in their communities. Some of the young people, implementing the initiatives, mentioned that they experienced a heavy crisis following the war and that planning and conducting an initiative has helped them to focus and regain a sense of purpose.

Also in Azerbaijan where the chances of working with civil society are becoming scarcer due to the repressions against civil society, the chance to engage with other actors, to share knowledge and experiences was especially attractive for youth involved in the “CONTACT” project.

Freedom in the development of approaches and contents of the initiatives has helped to foster creative approaches that were well suited to difficult situations on the ground. Working with young people, the emotional effects of war, even in those, who were not directly war-affected, should not be underestimated. Giving them the opportunity to become active helped to overcome the deadlock of war.

DIFFERENT ROLES BUT SIMILAR CHALLENGES FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

In spite of the differing roles in the conflict system, activists on both sides are similar to each other and struggle with similar challenges.

These are:

- The overwhelming power of prevailing discourses and conflict narratives;
- The isolation of peace activists from the main societies;
- Similar intergenerational relations, that prevent young peoples' voices from being heard;
- Similar deficiencies in democratic development of society as a whole and a rise of nationalism.

Paradoxically, these similarities create a situation, where the actors from the different sides are closer to one another and have more in common with one another, than with their own societies. In both societies, civil society actors are isolated, seeking contact with their surrounding communities. Here, effective, creative and attractive tools for conducting internal dialogue and stimulating critical and fruitful discussions inside the conflict-affected communities are required. In de-

veloping such tools, young peace activists in Azerbaijan and Armenia can learn from each other and inspire each other. But this is only a side-effect from the main challenges that lie inside each society.

This similarity in experiences creates a common ground between civil society actors from conflicting societies. It opens opportunities to exchange on strategies and practices and learn from each other in overcoming similar challenges. Even the more practical (Armenian) approach and the more theoretical (Azerbaijani) attitude have great potential to complement and enrich each other.

The “CONTACT” Project has ended for now, but there are young peace activists on both sides interested in continuing to work with their own society and exchange about the practice with activists on the other side. The most important lesson learned is however, that peaceful cohabitation cannot be achieved by textbook solutions. It has to be developed step by step and must be a result of the engagement of the actors with their own societies and each other.