



## Ways Forward: The International Working Group on Peace Building with Young Children

This book has presented the stories of a range of people working with young children and caregivers in areas affected by conflict. Through their experiences and perspectives we have found that, while each situation is unique, there are still a number of underlying issues and lessons to be drawn that are common to all contexts to varying degrees. These key lessons were drawn out in the last chapter. The purpose of this final chapter is to explore possible ways forward. In particular, the chapter describes the development, current work, and future plans of the International Working Group on Peace Building with Young Children. It tells the story of how a loosely connected group of individuals who were working with young children and their families in regions experiencing or emerging from conflict turned into a force reaching beyond local, regional, and national boundaries. The chapter identifies the key process steps that underpinned the successful formation of the International Working Group and then describes the current aims and objectives of the International Working Group and its future plans to support the early childhood sector and address the key lessons identified in the last chapter.

### Early childhood professionals working together

The formation and work of the International Working Group on Peace Building with Young Children is the

story of how a loosely connected group of individuals, whose common issues may not have been immediately apparent, turned into a force reaching beyond local, regional, and national boundaries. The group supported and sustained each other, developed this book and have long-term plans to continue to raise awareness and to make a difference. While the idea of bringing together professionals to identify common concerns, issues, and strategies is not a particularly unusual notion, the way in which the International Working Group developed and crystallized is worth reviewing as it does reflect a relatively unique approach within the early childhood sector to addressing the needs of young children and their caregivers living in conflict-affected societies on a truly global scale.

The International Working Group represents the first of several projects conceived by the World Forum Foundation and has achieved some important and successful outcomes. Within this it is possible to identify a number of key steps in the process of its development that have helped the International Working Group achieve some of its most important goals. These steps are described below in the hope of inspiring others to develop their own approaches to developing information and support networks. The chapter concludes with an outline of the current structure and plans for the International Working Group and details of where you can find more information.

## Key process steps in establishing the working group

In 2004 The World Forum Foundation in partnership with NIPPA — The Early Years Organisation — organised the first “Working Forum.” The theme was “Building Bridges: Healing Communities through Early Childhood Education.” The organisers, Bonnie and Roger Neugebauer of the World Forum Foundation and Siobhan Fitzpatrick and her team at NIPPA, conceived the original idea to bring together a group of practitioners, researchers, and others who were working with young children in conflict and post-conflict areas. These participants, and a few more, became the International Working Group.

Below, we describe the steps towards the realization of our group as an effective and sustainable entity.

### ***Step 1: Defining the goal***

For the International Working Group the aim was to create a meeting place for awareness raising, discussion, and debate around the issue of children affected by conflict. With this in mind, the initial goal of the International Working Group was to identify early childhood professionals doing important and innovative work in conflict-affected societies and to facilitate the sharing of their experiences and perspectives so that lessons could be learned regarding the nature of the issues and challenges they face and examples of good practice could be drawn out and disseminated. In bringing early childhood professionals with a common focus together in one place, it was anticipated that similarities could be identified and explored. The outcome, it was hoped, would be an articulation of the achievements and potential for early childhood professionals to act as agents for peace and reconciliation that would, in turn, resonate with others around the globe and in this way support all those who are dealing with the

devastating outcomes of children caught in conflict situations.

### ***Step 2: Identifying the participants***

For the International Working Group, participants were identified through personal networks and the recommendations of others to reflect experiences, regional representation and a variety of perspectives. Each participant was to have experience in working with children, families, and/or communities from conflict-ridden, violent, and other disruptive environments. However, despite attempts to ensure geographical representation and a spread of interests, some of the nominated participants were unable to join. Other participants ended up in the group because of serendipitous reasons. Strangely, this did not seem to matter and through the way the International Working Group was organised (see Steps 3 to 6 below) it coalesced perfectly. One of the lessons learned from this process was that it is less important to have members of the International Working Group representing specific roles, as it is to ensure that processes involved can make use of, and build upon, the strengths and knowledge base that each individual has to offer.

### ***Step 3: Pre-meeting preparation***

Once the list of participants had been confirmed, an eList (electronic mailing list) was established and circulated to all. This allowed the participants to communicate with each other; and the facilitators began the process of introductions and team development using this medium. Each participant was invited to participate in this several months in advance. The purpose was clearly articulated with each participant sharing the experiences, major concerns, and successes related to their own situation. Guiding questions were distributed using the listserv to assist with reflection and preparation. This pre-meeting activity clarified the goals for participants and allowed them to gather information within their regions, where necessary. All of this contributed to

the efficiency and effectiveness of the face-to-face meeting time, and became a facet of each subsequent meeting.

#### **Step 4:**

#### ***Including informal time and “trust building” activities from the outset***

When participants first met, they took part in a range of informal activities such as sharing meals, telling stories, and discussing their individual goals and hopes for the meeting, before actually getting down to “business.” The informal time facilitated the development of trust, which allowed group members to discuss sensitive issues and topics. One particularly powerful activity was the “Appreciation Table.” Here each participant was asked to place an object of personal significance to themselves on the table and then given a few minutes to tell why they had chosen that object. The exercise provided an opportunity for everyone to share information about their concern for their region in a very personal way. International Working Group members immediately felt the bonds and mutual support which developed from this simple exercise.

#### **Step 5:**

#### ***Structuring the context and the processes***

Participation in the International Working Group was categorised according to three distinct roles. The first consisted of the participants themselves who represented front line workers dealing with the effects of conflict on young children and families on a daily basis. This number was kept small (12-15), and this allowed people to sit in a circle during group to ensure eye contact and ease of interaction. A second role within the group was that of rapporteur. This consisted of a small team who did not actively participate in the discussions but made notes on important points, delineated issues which needed clarification, and provided a summary at the end of each session. Rapporteurs had diverse experience in the area of children and conflict. Collectively, they represented many perspectives. This was deemed to be a significant factor in the success of this team. The

rapporteurs sat in an outer circle around the participants.

The third function consisted of facilitation. Two expert facilitators — Betty Burkes and Diane Levin — developed each day’s agenda and ensured that discussions stayed focused and relevant. The facilitators also ensured that all participants had equal chances to speak. This was especially important for the International Working Group because a number of participants were working in a second language.

#### **Step 6:**

#### ***Sharing ideas and perspectives***

Participants were given a set period of time to tell about the situations and issues within their geographical regions. Some participants had prepared audio/visual presentations. Others presented with narratives and stories. While some instructions had been given, the framework was loose enough for each participant to share their story in a way that was comfortable for them. By the end of the first day, all participants agreed that despite the overarching goal of identifying similarities, it was critical that the unique characteristics of each conflict and post-conflict situation be acknowledged and respected. Beyond the search for generalized issues, the group focused upon identifying ways in which the early childhood sector can support and empower communities to address their individual (contextually relevant) strategies for peace.

This excerpt is just a small portion of the  
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