

Professor Commentary

Peace Through Health and Its Potential as a Transformative Lens



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“Peace Through Health” is a courageous idea advanced by health practitioners at McMaster and elsewhere to bring forward a consideration of “alternative” means to promote peace even in zones of active conflict. The word “alternative” is used to emphasize a contrast drawn between the approaches that have been used in peace through health and more traditional methods of addressing warfare and resolving conflict. In the recent book “Peace Through Health”, edited by Neil Arya and Joanna Santa Barbara, the case is made that health professionals have a clear duty to honour their Hippocratic Oath, and yet too often find themselves caught between the duties of ethics and politics all too often. The principled approach articulated under the rubric of peace through health urges the recognition and respect for human rights as a primary obligation and the fulfilling of higher moral commitments such as “to do no harm” as essential elements.

Much of the early peace through health effort has addressed the processes of peace and situations of those in the most dire circumstances such as wars in zones of conflict or state oppression. In

turn, we have begun to recognize that there are forces operating in the world that create inequitable conditions prejudicial to health and well-being on a global scale. Some of these forces are direct in their action and identifiable as to cause, while some are indirect and elusive in both actions and origins. Violence can adversely affect health and well-being through direct and bloody means such as armed conflicts.

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Additionally, indirect forms of violence can include the action of multinationals which are unconstrained by standards governing labour or environment, leading to slow death by malnutrition or toxic contamination. In either case, it is still violence that adversely affects the health and well-being of humanity.

In order to go beyond short-term interventions to reach the roots of violent confrontation and the resulting spread of ill health, we need to employ a very broad scope in our inquiry. It is here that peace through health

has enormous potential to make a revolutionary contribution. Speaking at the Canadian International Council conference on “The World in 2015: Implications for Canada” held recently in Ottawa, Ramesh Thakur remarked that increasingly intra-national or civil unrest of an ethnic character is replacing inter-national conflict (CPAC 7 February 2010). Thakur is perhaps best known for his contributions to advancing recognition of “the duty to protect” or as it has become more widely known “the responsibility to protect” within the United Nations system. If we are to be effective in promoting peace through health under conditions forecasting increasing civil violence in the future, then we need to adopt a proactive stance to the elimination of the root causes underlying what Haile Menkerios of the United Nations has described terrorist actions as increasingly desperate responses of desperate peoples (CPAC 7 February 2010). Menkerios goes on to say that we need to ask how this desperation came about, and speculated that terrorism and extremism are fostered by frustration with existing conditions, particularly in the Middle East. Here we clearly move across scales to pinpoint



Figure 1 A boy was wounded amid the chaos of Port-au-Prince's commercial district (courtesy of Ramon Espinosa/Associated Press)



Figure 2 Courtesy of Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

the direct causes of these impacts on health and well-being - from the level of individuals who suffer the traumas of injury and mortality, to the levels of larger organizations and affinities that are driving the conflicts occurring at regional, national and international scales.

Haiti provides us with a very significant lesson about violence and recovery partly because the world media are free to focus on the daily struggles of the Haitian people following the recent earthquake. The reason they are able to do this so effectively is due in part to the fact that the violence Haiti has experienced recently is non-partisan - there is no political edge to the death and destruction and therefore no censorship or contested meanings are attributed to the destruction of people's lives on the ground. In fact the destruction itself becomes the focus, and the impacts on the health and well-being of Haitians of all ages are key themes. For instance, issues of physical rescue and burial were prevalent in the media in the early days and needs for water, food, sanitation, and shelter has emerged and becomes increasingly urgent as time passes. It is very obvious that basic needs must be met or violence, injury and health impacts arise. It is not difficult to transpose the lessons to other scales and to other situations where destruction has begun with human actions instead of with natural causes. With this in mind, it is important to understand that Galtung's list of needs is entwined with the ladder of needs that

constitute the biological and sociological basis of human survival identified by Maslow. The health of the individual is also entwined with the health of the body politic - as well as the body economic.

In order to depolarize intra-national, inter-ethnic tensions that are seen as increasingly important sites of conflict and violence, some scholars flag the necessity of avoiding inappropriate concepts of justice, democracy and civil society (e.g. Cervan, February 5, 2010). Such ill-conceived interventions can exacerbate conflict, where what is needed are culturally appropriate and locally grounded solutions. Potential interveners and external forces need to listen - long and hard - before taking unilateral action. In any event, respect for all involved must be felt and shown. Rather than seeking to impose solutions as has been the case in colonial and neo-colonial relations to date, what is needed is a supportive, respectful and enabling approach. In short, we need a healing approach to the violated rights and relationships experienced at the level of ethnic and social groups; remedies for the indirect, structural violence embedded in colonial practices; as well as for the physical and psychological traumas experienced by individuals involved in direct conflicts. It is only by taking such a broad view, that we can seek to reduce present trends toward exponential growth in conflicts and casualties experienced in recent decades. 

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