

Can peacebuilding practice help build more inclusive societies in Europe?

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Over the last decade, several European cities have witnessed an increasing number of social protests and riots, particularly by young people. Their growing grievances, at times resulting in violent unrest in urban suburbs, are being attributed to social, economic, and political exclusion. Indeed, demonstrations that have taken place over the past few years in London, Paris and Stockholm have been largely viewed as a reaction to increasing economic inequalities, a lack of meaningful opportunities for engagement, as well as general social marginalisation.

| People of Tensta, Sweden.



‘Building peace’ in the European context?

While there is growing recognition of the challenges fuelling unrest in many of Europe’s socio-economically marginalised suburbs, the initiatives and programmes seeking to address these challenges are not sufficient. High rates of youth unemployment continue to feed a growing anger that cannot be solely addressed through economic growth. An increase in youth radicalisation and the urgency of the current migration crisis further reinforce this discontent, threatening the social fabric of many European nations. This multidimensional crisis poses new challenges to European governments whose competing political and financial priorities provide limited space and opportunities to implement long-term solutions to create more inclusive societies.

Reflecting on these challenges, we see that the issues threatening societal cohesion in Europe today are not dissimilar to those affecting countries that have experienced war or violent conflict. Without equating issues that beset countries at war, such as Syria, with problems faced by European cities, we can observe some similarities in terms of rising societal tensions. These tensions reflect people’s sense that they lack social belonging and are not meaningfully engaged in the development of their own communities and nations. Many groups, especially young people, are challenging this like never before.

The mounting frustrations and violence require that we look more closely at the issue of *exclusion* that is sowing the seeds of resentment, independent of a society’s level of development. The situation also requires looking at how *mistrust* can escalate into violence, even from small-scale problems.

Recent experiences show that the principles and foundations of peacebuilding have the potential to create innovative processes and to bring alternative solutions to addressing the current challenges in Europe. It is therefore legitimate to reflect on whether we can find inspiration and draw useful lessons from the vast experience that has emerged from the peacebuilding world. Can a peacebuilding approach be used to address the current European crisis? Can peacebuilding practice bring new thinking and spur innovations to build more inclusive societies in Europe?

With these questions in mind, Interpeace embarked on an experiment to put its 20 years of experience supporting peacebuilding in fragile countries to the test in Europe.

Stockholm
suburb Tensta.





Interpeace consultations with youth in Tensta.

Peacebuilding in Sweden – Interpeace’s engagement in a suburb of Stockholm

Two years ago, building on its extensive experience working with marginalised groups in various contexts, Interpeace started to explore how its methods and approaches could help address the dynamics of social exclusion and promote a more inclusive society in Sweden.

Like many other European societies, Sweden has faced challenges of exclusion and lack of integration. Home to a multitude of nationalities, Sweden has had a long history of welcoming migrants from many countries around the world, especially over the past 40 years¹. Sweden’s long-successful economic formula of capitalism interwoven with its substantial social welfare system has been challenged in the last two decades, especially as a result of the global economic downturns. Consequently, people in Sweden, as elsewhere around the globe, have had to contend with rising social inequality as neoliberal capitalism’s drive toward privatisation has brought austerity measures and cuts in public services.

Located on the outskirts of Sweden’s capital city, Tensta is a suburb with a large immigrant population² and has experienced social unrest and violent protests in recent years. The riots, such as those that took place in 2012 and 2013, have brought to light some of the underlying challenges facing Swedish society today, such as the widening socio-economic gap between ‘native’ Swedes and those with an immigrant background. Media coverage in Sweden has further reinforced the portrayal of Tensta and other relatively marginalised suburbs as unsafe and even dangerous. Recent incidents of violence highlight an urgent need to create spaces for dialogue, so as to start addressing underlying grievances and the frustrations of those living in the shadows of Sweden’s major cities.

Drawing on lessons learned and parallels from its work with marginalised groups and the youth sector in conflict-affected and fragile states, Interpeace launched a pilot project in Tensta in 2014. Interpeace carried out consultations with a broad range of stakeholders – including teachers, police, religious leaders, families and representatives of civil society – seeking to better understand the challenges and opportunities that people, and youth in particular, face in Tensta today.

Using video to engage youth

It is often difficult to effectively engage youth, especially those aged 15–19 years old, in comprehensive discussions about the opportunities and challenges they face.

To overcome this challenge, Interpeace gave video cameras to a group of young people in Tensta to let them tell their story in their own words. This resulted in the production of a short documentary, entitled *Dreams from Tensta*. The video explores the aspirations and key challenges facing the local community.

See www.interpeace.org/resource/dreams-from-tensta



Challenges to Sweden's social fabric

The work Interpeace carried out in Tensta sheds light on critical and complex challenges threatening social cohesion in Sweden's urban environments.

Key factors contributing to the feeling of social exclusion, particularly among youth, included issues related to identity, such as discrimination based on colour, nationality and cultural background; insufficient Swedish language skills; and difficulties in defining one's own role in Swedish society and culture. Despite Sweden's long tradition of welcoming migrants, many newcomers and second-generation immigrants have difficulty finding their place.

As in many other immigrant suburbs, Tensta's youth are often caught between two worlds: Swedish culture and the traditions of their parents who immigrated to Sweden. Navigating the complexities of being a young person, an immigrant and a Swede is not easy for many of them.

Despite the challenges of forming their identity, young people from Tensta have developed a strong bond with their district. They speak passionately about Tensta as a multicultural and community-based area.

The findings of Interpeace's work also revealed that the residents of Tensta feel excluded from the rest of Swedish society. This feeling is fuelled by a perceived neglect by state authorities. Tensta residents perceive that the local municipality, for example, is not providing them with the same level of services as their neighbours in the area of Spånga. They express concerns that politicians are disconnected from their community's realities and fail to take their needs into consideration when drafting policies that affect them.

The way Tensta has been portrayed by the media is another factor contributing to this feeling of marginalisation. Journalists often reinforce existing negative stereotypes about the area and its residents. However, the young people Interpeace met challenged this negative image of their neighbourhood. They were eager to dispel these stereotypes and expressed pride in being from Tensta.

In addition to perceived neglect by state authorities, spatial segregation between wealthier and poorer neighbourhoods has contributed to a sense of exclusion. Despite being geographically close to the centres of major cities, residents in neighbourhoods such as Tensta, Husby and Rosengård feel increasingly disconnected from mainstream Swedish society.

In Sweden's urban neighbourhoods, high levels of unemployment, limited economic means and the absence of public spaces in which to socialise all have considerable influence on the social wellbeing of residents, and youth in particular. Furthermore, the lack of sufficient resources in education and early employment, the primary channels through which young people become integrated in society, is causing growing tensions. With difficult socio-economic conditions come rising levels of criminality, which in turn discourages businesses from operating in the neighbourhood. This limits local economic opportunities for residents in the district.

Interpeace also found that the over-negative image in local and national media of suburbs with large immigrant populations has reinforced the feeling of marginalisation and overshadows many of the positive assets of these suburbs. In fact, the majority of residents of communities such as Tensta proudly boast about the multicultural and welcoming nature of their neighbourhood.

These differences in perception make it difficult to bridge the gap between residents of Tensta and the rest of Swedish society.

The lack of trust and dialogue between youth and law enforcement agencies has fuelled tensions and often contributed to dramatic incidents. Increasing positive interactions between the police and urban youth, outside of formal settings, can serve to address tensions and reduce the frequency of confrontations.

Adapting the peacebuilding discourse and practice

Interpeace's project in Sweden found that exclusion, in a context of increased socio-economic inequality, deeply affects the residents of Sweden's suburbs and contributes to poor integration with the rest of Swedish society. The work highlighted the importance of engaging local communities so that their views can be shared and their voices heard by local authorities.

This inclusive and participatory approach, used in every context where Interpeace operates, ensures that a broad base of people share a sense of ownership and responsibility for strengthening social cohesion, reconciliation and the improvement of their society. By engaging everyone in a process of change, inclusivity begins to build bridges of understanding. This, in time, enables the society collectively to move towards greater cohesion and, in certain contexts, more peaceful environments.

In Sweden, the principles of inclusive engagement were well received by the local actors. Moving away from the dichotomised notions of peace and conflict, the project applied the concepts of social cohesion and integration, which are well understood by local actors and relate to the Swedish context.

Creativity and flexibility were particularly relevant elements in the dynamic context of Sweden. The use of social technology proved highly relevant in the country's digital environment, specifically the use of video to engage young people who are often hard to reach.

Beyond the technical adaptations of Interpeace's approach in the European context, the experience in Sweden demonstrated that there are new ways of thinking about 'building peace' in places that are closer to 'home'. The universal principles of inclusivity and participation, which are at the core of peacebuilding, have the potential to contribute to laying the foundations for more cohesive and inclusive societies, regardless of their geographic location and level of development.

Given today's outlook in the European context, bringing people together, asking questions, listening to various voices and shaping common engagement is needed now more than ever.

Notes

- ¹ It is estimated that among the 9.6 million inhabitants of Sweden, those with a foreign background represent 20.75 per cent of the total population (including native-born with two foreign-born parents), or 15.9 per cent if we only consider the foreign-born, who are largely concentrated in the outskirts of Sweden's large cities. (Source: Stockholm's statistics, accessed August 2014, www.scb.se/sv/Hitta-statistik/Statistikdatabasen/Variabelvaljare/?px_tableid=ssd_extern%3aUtlSvBakgTot&rxid=825bb12e-45b4-468b-8828-d617b10149ac)
- ² The district of Tensta has received many migrants over the last 30 years. More than 85 per cent of the population has a foreign background, and Tensta counts more than 30 nationalities among its residents. (Source: The City of Stockholm Executive Office, 'Youth work and projects in Tensta', accessed June 2014, www.tenstacc.se/2b/library/files/11/ungdomsverksamheter_S_T.pdf)

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