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(Localised) Community Development: unlocking cross-border potential

James Garo Derounian, University of Gloucestershire, England jderounian@glos.ac.uk

Introduction

The author will argue in this article that top-down, state-to-state diplomacy can be usefully complemented by promoting interactions between local communities spanning the Armenian-Turkish border. As far back as 1955 the United Nations published 'Social Progress through Community Development', in which it concluded that whilst "Governments have a vital role to play in achieving economic and social progress…such progress can be accelerated, especially in areas which are less developed economically, if the latent abilities and energies of the people are utilized in self-help activities for the improvement of their communities" (page 116).

The article is presented in linked sections: The **first** will explain what bottom-up community development is. In **section two**, a series of starting points are set down as practical mechanisms through which suspicion can be broken down and mutual interest fostered across the sealed border. The article then moves to confront difficulties facing such a localised approach, before concluding with recommendations in favour of modest, sustained and constructive actions that benefit Turkish and Armenian villages and towns lying close to the border; so that through multiple small-scale ventures the barrier may transform into a route for social, economic and environmental improvement.

> *"The challenge ahead is to transform old frontiers into borders secured through trade and human interactions. Cross-border cooperation will be the reconciliation with geography and the triumph of people over history"* [tepav, 2009: 3]

"The key purpose of community development work is collectively to bring about social change and justice by working with communities" (National Occupational Standards NOS in Community Development Work 2003, online). The updated 2009 Occupational Standards also emphasise people working together to improve "the quality of their own lives, the communities in which they live, and societies of which they are a part." (Lifelong Learning UK (2009: 4.)

On the eve of the twenty-first century, development specialist & academic Robert Chambers (in Warburton 1998: 121) argued that people's capacity to do things can be enhanced "through learning, practice, training and education", leading to greater well-being. This implies that peer-to-peer learning by community activists on both sides of the border, offers a direct and powerful means of do-it-yourself improvement.

As an adjunct, Francis and Henderson (1992: 75) observed that it is essential for those engaged in community development "to support local people, and sometimes this should take the form of education and training." Such support for localised community development has found practical expression through programmes at the European and national level: The European LEADER (Liaisons Entre Actions de Dévelopement de l'Economie Rurale) initiatives have since 1991, for example, supported vocational training to "develop the skills of local people and so enable them to participate more fully in the local economy and socio-cultural life" (Ray, 1996: 156). This EU dimension assumes significance, for example, in relation to the Turkish Government's discussions around accession to the Union. Similarly ECOVAST (The pan-European *European Council for the Village and Small Town*) – in 2008 - advocated "enabling local communities in civil society to influence local policies, methods of applying finance and implementation." In this regard, whether in developed or developing countries, there is an established and continuing community-based trajectory to policies, programmes, projects and practices….on which to build.

At root, community development offers a pragmatic way forward for individuals and communities in the vicinity of the Turkish-Armenia closed border:

Community development "is about 'getting things done'…but it is also about the creative development of people – people working together to support eachother, involving and giving power and responsibility to disadvantaged people, growing in confidence and competence through active participation, confronting inequalities in society." (Francis & Henderson, 1992:2). It offers a practical means to get things done; but also amplifies individual and collective capacity (to get things done). So the very act of involvement can establish a virtuous circle of further participation and skills accumulation. Community involvement also emphasises the importance of processes (how decisions are reached) and products (tangible results flowing from collaboration).

Starting points for Turkish-Armenian local community collaborations

Given long-standing mistrust between Armenians and Turks, community development offers a gradual, steady, longer-term possibility, and limited risk in pursuit of mutually beneficial actions. In particular, **self-interest** represents a key starting point for cross-border working. Derounian (1996) put forward four forms of self-interest that drive individual involvement in local community initiatives – commercial or financial gain, personal advantage, political advancement or legal requirement. Derounian goes on to contend that "self-interest is the most powerful motive for individual development of…community projects." In the case of communities close to the border - such as Kars & Gyumri (on the Armenian side) and Erzurum & Van (in Turkey) – there is clear and repeated evidence that "reopening of the border would greatly benefit Armenia's economy and society…..Turkey also loses significantly from the closure, while having much to gain from a policy reversal." (European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2007: 2 & TESEV & Caucasus Institute, 2009). Although it is fully acknowledged that anger and a sense of injustice represent counter-weights to such self-interest. There is nothing wrong with self-interest, so long as it is made explicit and transparent – why shouldn't individuals gain as well as their communities?

So how can you make a constructive change against the backdrop of long-standing enmity and dispute?

Small scale, modest, and speedy projects ("quick wins") can build trust & confidence as positive changes are witnessed by local people, on the ground. For example, **'**soft gains' can constitute a relatively safe starting point; that can, in turn, lead to 'hard benefits': whereby shared cultures, festivals, traditions, food and drink, music, arts and crafts may feed into money-making tourist initiatives. The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, for example, points to multiple ventures, building small scale ties, cross border projects with women, children, artists, photographers & academics, going on for at least 5 years. An example of this is the 2015 Hrant Dink Foundation-sponsored cross border photographic exhibition, "Beyond the River", focusing on the border experience of the villagers of Bagaran (Armenia) and Halıkışak (Turkey) situated along – and divided by - a river. A key message from these portraits is the fact that you have no idea whether you are looking at an Armenian or Turk…..but what they do convey is a unity that those photographed are border people, connected through hardship, history, geography, landmarks…..

The case of Corrymeela (Northern Ireland) is particularly instructive in terms of conflict resolution between warring (Protestants and Catholics) groups that has persisted over generations. "Corrymeela's mission is: embracing difference, healing division and enabling reconciliation. Our vision is of a peaceful and sustainable society based on social justice, positive relationships and respect for diversity." The Corrymeela Community was founded in 1965. (http://www.corrymeela.org/). Work over 50 years illustrates the long-term nature of rebuilding trust, of practising community development and seeking intra and inter-generational sustainability. Quick wins maybe be first steps but they argue that there are no quick fixes. In Northern Ireland, for example, dismantling of official peace lines – only for these to be re-built elsewhere by communities themselves – illustrates the impact of the 'weight of history' in hindering change – though this, of course, is not a reason for not trying.

Corymeela's work on truth and reconciliation manifests itself through volunteering and programmes for young adults, primary & secondary schools. "Today there are approximately 160 Community members and more than 5,000 friends living throughout Ireland and beyond" (Corymeela online) This provides a practical example, of how hatred of 'the other' can reduce in the face of social interactions, such as eating together.

Lovett (*et al,* 1994: 185) assert that "community development has provided a bridge across the community divide. It has acted as a form of social cement preventing N. Ireland from sliding into a Bosnian situation….it has a role to play in easing conflict…stressing its concern with equality, democracy and empowerment."

This notion is reinforced by Jenny Pearce (Peace Studies, Bradford University, 2009: 11) who argues for "'security from below'….to humanise security provision by focusing attention on the lived experiences of insecurity…Rethinking security from below is not a suggestion for replacing the state; it is instead an attempt to increase the capacity of communities and local level actors to articulate their demands…based on agreed norms and democratic principles…"

Cross-border tourism represents a further opportunity, based on (shared) customs, cuisine, traditions, festivals, as well as the dramatic scenery of the region, may all appeal to those in diaspora or who have emigrated – but wish to introduce their families or re-introduce themselves to where they may have been born, or where ancestors came from. An extension of this idea is the possibility of a community/regional *Supporters Club*: in the Swedish village of Lovvik former residents scattered around the globe contributed knowledge, contacts and finance to build an elder-care centre. Additionally the community "created an annual accordion festival with up to 1,000 visitors, many from other countries, in which the local residents provide accommodation in their own homes" (Onyx & Edwards, 2010:12). Food & drink – cooking and partying – are deemed to be an enjoyable and sociable basis for community interaction (Community Food & Health, Scotland, online). A further example of heritage-based action comes from another Swedish village – Överhogdal – in 1910 a visiting artist took "a look in the three sheds by the church. The church had recently been restored, and one of the sheds was used to store old planks and all kinds of rubbish from the old church interior. Right inside the door lay a bundle of textiles", which turned out to be an 11th century tapestry depicting Norse mythology; and in particular the Yggdrasil (tree of life)

And what about harnessing local council resources to initiate joint projects: road improvements that cross the border, joint marketing ventures, and tourist itineraries that weave across the divide to take in historic, religious and other sites. Each Turkish town of 2,000+ people, for example, is a municipality headed by an elected mayor; whilst smaller units are villages (köy derneg), in which headmen supervise implementation of community projects & administers directives from higher authorities. Village councils already decide labour and money contributions from residents for road maintenance and other community improvements. Their counterpart authorities in Armenia comprise elders and a community-elected head. The average population of an Armenian community is (just) 2,350 – implying that intercommunalite/ joint working would generate economies of scale; and overcome what the Council of Europe (online) has termed Armenia's "fragmented, small-municipality system of local government". Intercommunalite in France enables small municipalities (local councils) to join together to provide services such as household waste collection & public transport or to jointly conceive and deliver economic development.

There is a further opportunity open to and through religious groups and leaders – both Christian and Muslim - built upon doctrinal imperatives of toleration and partnership. US academic, Jamal, writes that voluntarism is "integral to the daily lives of many Muslims". Similarly the New Testament (Book of Galatians, chapter 5) exhorts Christians to "serve one another in love". There is furthermore, clear research evidence that those 'of faith' are most likely to be active citizens and to engage in community development and organising (Derounian, 2014: 8). This opening can be facilitated by clergy and imams, as well as their congregations.

The *Armenia Round Table*, for example, "aims to strengthen the most vulnerable communities at different levels and build up community based groups in a responsive and self-reliant mode."

Sports offer another avenue for cross-border interaction and cooperation. This mirrors the 'football diplomacy' conducted in 2008 between the Turkish and Armenian Governments (Economist online). Sport England, for example, published & promoted *Building communities: developing strong, sustainable & cohesive communities through sport* (2008, online). Similarly the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation has financed links between young adults across the sealed border; on the basis that young people are more likely to display openness, fresh thinking, and be less tainted by history and entrenched hostilities.

The concerted combination of complementary individual and community skills represents a practical response to limited resources and the possibility of Aristotle's statement that "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Or to put it another way, border communities can multiply their resources and capability for constructive action by utilising combined social capital, in terms of retired local teachers; young adults; business people, builders, local politicians with deep local knowledge, contacts, and electricians, help-in-kind and so on:

Given widespread use of the internet, and social media such as Facebook and Twitter, a safe first step may be virtual meetings – crossing boundaries without ever leaving your home, or home land. For example initiating contact via Skype or other electronic audio-visual means such as YouTube. The intention is to enable dialogue - to defer tackling difficult issues, in the short-term, not to deny them.

Conclusion

The political philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote On *Democracy* in 1835:

The "strength of free peoples resides in the local community. Local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they put it within the people's reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it."

Similarly, academics Stokes and Knight (1997:11) offer a challenge: "we have a duty to exercise our power as citizens, thoughtfully & collectively. If we do not, who shall we blame?"

For too long the Central Governments of Armenia and Turkey have ebbed and flowed in their policy pronouncements around rapprochement; and yet – in 2015 – the common border remains sealed. Localised community engagement offers a complementary approach to national peace building and reconciliation. Only through contact, based on mutual needs and desires, can we move towards opening minds, and ultimately, the border. It remains a great, cheap and pragmatic possibility.

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