

Defying Gravity:
Evaluating the Trickle-Up Effects of Reconciliation Programmes

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Abstract

The process by which grassroots reconciliation activities facilitate change in individual conflict identities gravitating upwards to shape other levels of society is often under-explained. In most aspects of the peacebuilding process impact is measured downwards, but reconciliation usually starts with micro-level attitudinal shifts rather than large-scale societal change. Yet, successful conflict resolution and reconciliation depends upon significant mass support. Therefore, the long-term success of reconciliation programmes lies in the paradoxical process of these individual changes simultaneously sinking into the heart of post-conflict societies, whilst rising to effect institutional change. Isolated group shifts need to both ripple outwards and trickle-upwards to shape decision-making processes and affect the course of the conflict. In order to evaluate the potential of reconciliation rippling and rising to transform conflict identities from the individual to society at large and above, I draw upon a unique collection of surveys and interviews of alumni of reconciliation activities and reconciliation entrepreneurs in Israel-Palestine and Bosnia. The outcome of this research contributes to understanding the dynamic that facilitates the trickle-up effect of reconciliation, as well as providing practitioners with an evaluation mechanism to assess the impact of grassroots reconciliation programmes through its constituency building potential.

“There’s no fight we cannot win, you and I, defying gravity.”
(Stephen Schwartz, 2003)

Introduction

On 17 April 2018, alongside the memorials preceding Israel’s 70th Independence Day, nearly 7000 Jewish and Arab Israelis attended an Alternative Memorial Day ceremony in Tel-Aviv. The event co-organised by two NGOs (Israeli & Palestinians Bereaved Families for Peace and Combatants for Peace (CfP)) that started as two small grassroots NGOs trying to bring together bereaved families and former participants in the conflict. The Israeli High Court overturned the Defence Minister, Avigdor Lieberman’s attempts to bar 90 Palestinians from attending, and the event received mainstream coverage in national and international news media.¹ During a time when the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has been at an impasse, the reconciliation work to which these organisations have been dedicated on an individual level managed to rise to impact at the highest levels of government. Have they managed to defy gravity?

In the current post-conflict peacebuilding paradigm, the ink is barely dry on the agreement when the well-oiled machine of development agencies, international organisations, and governments launch into their final battle – the battle to transform the hearts and minds of parties and populations in conflict. Yet in this battle lies a paradox. *Individual* conflict identities need to be transformed to facilitate *societal change*, but this is predicated on *elite-level* triggering and support of these processes. A process requiring “both a political and public momentum” (Rosoux, 2017: 20). As Bloomfield (2006: 25-26) has highlighted, whilst reconciliation initiatives may originate at the grassroots level, without some measure of institutional support, their effectiveness is likely to be limited. Indeed, the combination of both NGO-led reconciliation and government-led reconciliation is associated with a 44% decrease in the likelihood of a breakdown of a peace agreement (Garson, 2017).²

Therefore, lasting conflict resolution is predicated upon the process of individual-level transformation both sinking-in, trickling-up and rippling-out to the development of peace constituencies that can help the formulation and maintenance of peace agreements. Transforming the initial afterglow of participation in reconciliation activities into meaningful action. In this paper, I draw upon a collection of surveys and interviews of alumni of reconciliation activities as well as reconciliation entrepreneurs in Israel-Palestine and Bosnia to evaluate the process by which reconciliation attempts to defy gravity. I explore the dynamic through which participation in reconciliation and contact programmes leads to individual transformation that has the potential to impact societal level. In line with recent increased academic and practitioner interest into the impact factors and transfer effects of reconciliation activities (cf. Lazarus, 2017; Castarphen & Shapiro, 2016) I seek to expand the understanding of the process, potential and limits to reconciliation rising beyond the individual and local level, as well as provide a framework for evaluating the success of grass-roots reconciliation programmes.

¹ See <https://www.jta.org/2018/04/18/news-opinion/israelis-palestinians-hold-controversial-alternative-memorial-day-ceremony>

² Garson, “The Third Pillar: The Role of Reconciliation in Supporting Peace Agreements,” unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 2017. Based on analysis of peace agreements in 41 intractable conflicts between 1945-2013.

Approaches to Measuring the Impact of Reconciliation

Studies measuring the wider impacts of reconciliation have been more limited than analysis of other conflict resolution mechanisms. There has been some analysis of the influence of transitional justice mechanisms on the post-conflict environment (Stover & Weinstein, 2004; Lie et al., 2007; Brounéus 2008; Chapman, 2009; Aiken, 2013), the impact of reconciliation events (Long & Brecke, 2003), and whether reconciliation can be negotiated or is in fact possible (Rosoux, 2014; 2015). However, there has been less comprehensive analysis of the impact of grassroots intergroup encounters and their role in the peacebuilding process. Much of this work has been focused on the analysis of individual programmes, often focused on specific aspects or techniques used within the programmes, the direct effects of the interactions, and how to improve the quality of the interaction (Kelman, 1998; Fisher, 2005; Maoz, 2000, 2011; Suleiman, 2004; Bar-On & Kassem, 2004; Hewstone et al., 2008(b)). Scholars have brought together collections of successful civil society initiatives that involve reconciliation or co-existence that have contributed to peace building (cf. Chayes & Minow, 2003; Tongeren et al.; 2005), but there still remains a lack of systematic analysis of their role in preventing conflict recurrence.

There is also a sense that some of the literature overstates the objectives and impacts of their projects, and that the evaluations of these programmes do not provide generalizable findings (Lund, 2015: 34-35). Lund and Macdonald (2015) recently tried to close this gap in their study of six unofficial conflict resolution initiatives. Similarly, USIP's recent Reconciliation in Practice project (McKone, 2015) has sought to provide an overview of reconciliation practices worldwide, their evaluation mechanisms and potential impacts. Here, too, the project highlighted the difficulties in developing indicators of demonstrable impact, and evaluation practices that yield widely applicable lessons (ibid.: 42). More recently, Lazarus, in his comprehensive analysis of Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding, emphasised the need for “methods of measuring impact to keep pace with the expanding repertoire of peacebuilding practice” (2017: 51). Similarly, Castarphen and Shapiro's (2016) study of USIP dialogue projects, provides one of the most comprehensive analyses to date of the potential transfer effects of peacebuilding programmes.

This paper aims to build upon this new wave of research to provide an understanding of the way that contact and reconciliation activities can move beyond individual and small group level transformations to lay the foundation for the formation of peace constituencies. In turn, these constituencies that, given the right circumstances, could eventually challenge the divisive elite-driven politics. This provides insights to both researchers and practitioners as to imperative that reconciliation activities provide the opportunities for constituency building beyond mere contact in order to have the potential to effect wider change.

Towards a Theory for Measuring the Impact of Reconciliation

Understanding Conflict Identities

Long-running violent conflicts are the grounds of recurrent negative interactions between the parties that breed a “socio-psychological infrastructure” built of “prejudice, mistrust, hatred, and animosity” (Bar Tal, 2013: 51-52). The conflict permeates their consciousness, attitudes, and beliefs and becomes an inherent part of their being. Revising their attitude towards the conflict would involve “jeopardi[sing] their entire world view” and force a process of introspection in which they would have to closely examine their entire belief system (Kelman, 2007: 91). This “infrastructure,” in time, is embedded in the collective psyche of the parties leading to a “shared repertoire” about the conflict and fuelling commitment to the conflict (Bar Tal, 2013: 16-17), eventually passing a psychological “point of no return” to the point that the parties develop “a sense of reality in which the hostilities are as natural as the landscape” (Coleman, 2006: 541).

Conflict identities are grounded in collective memories and narratives that are developed and hardened over the course of a long-running conflict, acting as barriers to de-escalation or resolution (Kelman, 2007:81-82). The “conflict ethos” (Bar Tal, 2013) is underpinned by perceptual and cognitive processes such as stereotyping, ethnocentrism, selective perception, self-fulfilling prophecies, and cognitive rigidity. These are the lynchpin of the de-legitimation, demonization, and dehumanisation of the out-group. When compounded by the lack of normal association, even when parties live within close proximity to each other or in supposedly heterogenous areas,³ these hardened stereotypes become immune to revision and reassessment.

The Pivotal Role of Reconciliation

In this paper I define reconciliation as a *process* by which parties transform the attitudes underpinning their conflict identities in order to develop new networks and relationships that contribute to sustainable peace. It is the slow process that allows for the building of new relationships and peaceful relations that should be conducted by the leadership and civil society simultaneously in order to have maximum impact (Bloomfield, 2006; 8). It is a reciprocal process and cannot emerge if only one side is engaged in the process (Bar-Tal, 2009: 372). As such, it is often a painstaking and lengthy process that emerges from the partial reconciliation resulting from activities at the leadership level to the full reconciliation within which peace between the parties becomes entrenched and permanent at all levels of society.

Role of Joint Activities in Transforming Individual Conflict Identities

The process of psychological change usually starts with small groups changing their attitudes rather than large-scale change on the societal level (Bar-Tal, 2009: 372). Indeed, if intractable conflicts are viewed as bottom-up processes, then the reconciliation efforts need to start from the bottom. Joint grassroots reconciliation activities, often based on the principles of Allport’s contact hypothesis (1954), aim to facilitate identity change by addressing the structural and psychological commitment that individuals make to the conflict. Such activities are predicated on the theory that when intimate contact is established allows parties to discover similarities with an individual rather than a stereotype.

³ Such dynamics can be observed in places such as Mostar (Bosnia), Belfast (Northern Ireland) or Jerusalem (Israel).

Reconciliation activities use a range of diverse and creative approaches to create such “normal” interaction among conflicting parties. Some engage the participants in formal psychological education and others aim purely to increase contact and create positive associations with the other party. The instrumental reconciliation approach (Nadler & Schnabel, 2006) is based on instituting cooperative projects by which trust and acceptance between the parties grows through the gradual learning process of repeated cooperation. Drama, music, and art can be vehicles for cooperative activities that help participants address the past and increase interaction, and cooperative projects in the fields of business, medicine, and academia can help cement a joint future.⁴ All of these programmes are built on the engagement of the parties in relational and cultural transformation. This transformation allows for the development of mutual knowledge, acceptance, understanding, respect for difference and recognition of commonalities (cf. Bar-Tal: 2009; 2013). Positive contact with the outgroup through activities that lead to dialogue and friendship, lead to a more measured appraisal of events and potentially more positive attitudes towards a peace process (Halperin, 2015: 31). This is at the heart of the mechanisms theorised in this special issue and creates the basis of familiarity and liking that leads to cooperative relations, valuing peace and developing mechanisms for resisting intergroup boundaries.

Whilst the measurement of the success of contact programmes on the individual level has been well-documented, the measurement of the success of these programmes within the wider reconciliation process remains contested. The difficulties in measurement are compounded by the fact that it is not a linear process of change but often encapsulates a process of forwards and backwards steps (Bar-Tal, 2009: 372). Similar to Lund and McDonald (2015: 29), I propose that the impact of these transformations can be measured in the extent to which it leads to the formation of peace constituencies by which individual transformations lead to continued contact, participation and entrepreneurial action between former participants that is aimed at wider audiences and the political level. It is such action that can evidence the nexus between individual transformation and impact on the societal-level.

Peace Constituencies: The Link between Individual and Group Transformation

The wider impact of reconciliation is dependent on the “reciprocal process of individual and group level change,” convincing the larger group to “accept these new understandings as a basis for global group action” (Baron, 2008: 283). Individual-level changes need to “penetrate deep into societal fabric so they are shared by the majority of both rival groups of society members” (Bar-Tal, 2013: 376) and in turn effect “large scale institutional change” (ibid: 285). This leads to the question as to, how do individual-level changes “trickle up” and transform conflict identities in society-at-large?

Dayton and Kreisberg (2012: 11) highlight how conflict resolution practitioners encourage contact activities so that “individuals can overcome their parochial identities and develop a new superordinate identity that includes their former adversary.” Individual action and change can trickle up to result in mass level mobilisation “if a mass of people exist whose individual

⁴ These programmes can be summarised as either information-based interventions that provide participants with new information that challenges previously held beliefs; experience-based interventions that unfreeze conflict-supporting beliefs; or skill training interventions that help individuals address emotional and cognitive reactions (Hameiri & Halperin, 2015: 177-181).

constituents share the same national identification.... this mass may act as one unit in situations which affect the shared identity” (Bloom, 1990: 53).

Changing individual group members’ worldview through reconciliation can translate to societal transformation through the creation of “peace constituencies” (Lederach, 1997: 94) that is, groups or social networks who actively support the peace-building process (Bar-Tal, 2013: 430). Even if the group may be small, theories of minority influence (Moscovici, 1976) highlight that change originates with those who may have different attitudes from the majority, and that if minority groups are credible and can resonate with the majority group, then they can potentially impact the majority (Gerard, 1985: 172-173). Consequently, the impact of reconciliation activities can be measured through the process of individual transformation rising to the build peace constituencies that have the potential to induce wider societal transformation.

Measuring Reconciliation Rising

One of the key uses of case studies is to investigate causal mechanisms, helping the reader “peer[ing] into the box of causality and to locate the intermediate factor lying between some structural cause and its purported effect” (Gerring, 2009: 44-45). Causal mechanisms or processes can be understood as the “unobservable physical, social, or psychological processes through which agents with causal capacities operate, but only in specific conditions, to transfer energy, information, or matter to other entities” (George and Bennett, 2005: 137). In this paper these mechanisms would be the elements of reconciliation activities that induce attitudinal change or disarm the conflict identity on the individual level, which leads to a societal transformation.

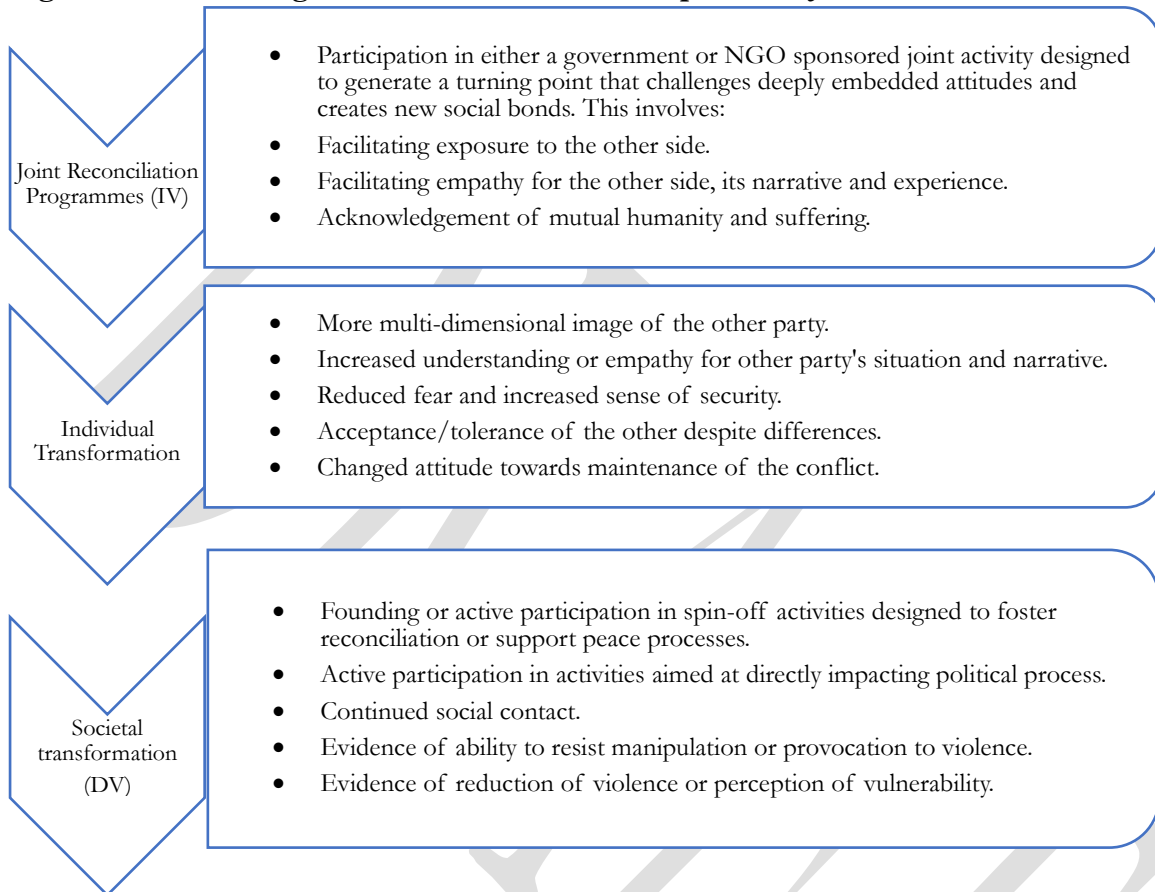
The case study demonstrates the process by which joint reconciliation programmes and activities, the independent variable, lead to initiatives promoting societal-level reconciliation. It rests on the nexus between individual conflict identity transformation, continued positive contact with the outgroup, and whether more positive attitudes towards the peace process result (Halperin, 2015). Peace constituencies of people committed to non-violent approaches to resolving the conflict diminish the chances of peace agreement breakdown through resorting to violence or impeding implementation. Therefore, the dependent variable is the commitment to create networks pursuing continued engagement in promoting peaceful or non-violent approaches to the resolution of the conflict.

Anderson and Olson (2003) have been at the forefront of providing a methodology for evaluating the effectiveness of such programmes and have suggested that at the wider societal level, the effectiveness of a programme should be measured by assessing changes in the overall environment outside of the actions for which they are directly responsible. This would include measurements such as whether participants go on to develop their own initiatives; the creation or reform of political institutions which address the grievances fuelling the conflict; people’s subsequent ability to resist manipulation or provocation to violence; and a reduction of threat of violence or a changed perception of vulnerability (Anderson and Olson 2003:15-18). More recently, Lund and McDonald (2015: 35-37) sought to establish evidence of direct impacts such as changed perceptions and attitudes, greater empathy; cross-cutting relationships with increased trust; reduction of hostility in communications; development of mutually beneficial interests; new vocabulary; and dispute resolution capacities. They also look for evidence of engaging new

participants, the use of public resources and spin-off partnerships that improve relationships (ibid.).

Building upon both sets of criteria, Figure 1 sets out the process by which I propose that participation in joint reconciliation activities lead to an individual level transformation that in turn ripples outward to create peace constituencies and trickles-up to impact the wider societal level.

Figure 1 Tracing the Causal Effect of Participation in Joint Reconciliation Activities



Joint reconciliation programmes

Survey respondents and interviewees were coded as having participated in a joint reconciliation programme if the survey or interview data clearly stated that they had participated in such programmes. The data was also examined for the extent to which the programme facilitated exposure and empathy for other parties.

Individual level transformation

The assessment of the transformation of the conflict identity is based on evidencing changes such as reappraisal of dehumanised and deindividuated stereotypes, increased empathy, acceptance and tolerance of the other despite difference, and a changed attitude towards the maintenance of the conflict.

Societal transformation

This research utilises the Anderson and Olson (2003) criteria as a base but also considers the following as indicators of relational and cultural transformation that are similar to the Lund and McDonald (2015) criteria: willingness to continue participation in such activities; recommending the activity to a friend; and continued post-activity contact with other participants. The evidence for these positions is drawn from the responses to the Alumni Survey, which asked the participants to detail the way the participating in joint activities has impacted their lives in both the short and the long term; whether they have any continued contact with other participants in the programme; as well as about any spin-off activities with which they are actively engaged. I was particularly interested in finding activities that gained some level of trickle-up impact on the middle or leadership level, such as the participant in Bosnia who was working on trying to get a change to the federal law on detainees (BiH Alumni Survey, 742647) or Raed Hadar (2010), who co-founded CFP after participating in the Sulha project and is now involved in organising the annual Alternative Memorial Day ceremony.

Data

As highlighted above there have been analyses of outcomes of reconciliation activities conducted in these cases motivated by both the need to provide evaluations to funders and academic study. These are triangulated with my original survey data in order to “provide the cross-checks for the causal inferences being drawn” (Bennett & Checkel, 2015: 28). My surveys were based in part on Worchel and Coutant’s (2008) model and designed to measure variables related to theories of conflict resolution, reconciliation, and models of peaceful coexistence. The survey comprises of 41 questions and included both closed multiple-choice options as well as open-ended opportunities to explain choices. These were distributed to the participants through NGOs and their networks. There was a mixed response to the survey process, with Bosnia (2013) yielding the largest pool of respondents, with 81 respondents (47% Bosniak, 22% Bosnian Croat, 27% Bosnian Serb). Israel-Palestine yielded only 17 and 16 responses respectively, despite significant engagement with organisations.

The survey data was supported by analysis of 118 (63% Israeli, 35% Palestinian) interviews and personal accounts of participants in reconciliation activities, that has not been analysed as a single unit previously. The accounts were drawn from the PCFF’s narratives project,⁵ Just Vision,⁶ CFP,⁷ and the Forgiveness Project.⁸ In order to control for intervening motivations such as participation being driven by the opportunity to visit another country, or parental pressure to participate, the focus was upon locally based, well-established organisations bringing together adults (over sixteen years old). One of the greatest challenges, particularly, in the Israeli-Palestinian context is finding similarly representative samples from all groups. Whilst this is a limited sample drawn between 2002-2013 both the surveys and interview collections provide a rich source of qualitative data during a time in which reconciliation activities were operating under challenging political

⁵ See Parents-Circle Family Forum, <http://center.theparentscircle.org/WrittenTestimonials.aspx>.

⁶ See Just Vision, www.justvision.org.

⁷ See Combatants for Peace, <http://cfpeace.org/personal-stories/>.

⁸ See The Forgiveness Project, <http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/>.

circumstances. More recent accounts of reconciliation activities have been used to provide further illustration. The lessons that can be drawn from this multi-pronged approach provide insights as to strategies for practitioners seeking to operate in the current stalled environment.

Roads to Reconciliation in Israel-Palestine

Background

The signing of the Declaration of Principles (also known as Oslo I or the Oslo Accords) was intended to signal the close of some of the most bitter and long-held enmity in the Middle East, “an end to blood and tears” (Address of Yitzchak Rabin, 13 September 1993). However, Oslo I did not set out concrete provisions for reconciliation activity. Annex VI to the Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (28 September 1998 *hereinafter* Oslo II) set out more far-reaching measures to establish “dialogue and cooperation ... in order to ensure that peace, stability and cooperation” (Clause 1, Article 1, Annex VI, Oslo II). Annex VI continues to set out a proposal for joint-cooperation in the economic, scientific, technological, cultural, educational arenas, and that dialogue should be facilitated through the “People-to People” programme. The reconciliation work was premised on the principle that “while political leaders can make peace, only people can build peace” (Uri Savir quoted in Endresen, 2001: 9).

Widely viewed with great scepticism for their failure to efficiently impact political process so as to prevent the Second Intifada (Hermann, 2009; Herzog and Hai, 2005; Liel 2005-2006) and subsequent Hamas initiated violence, People-to-People activities⁹ have been labelled as “little more than an isolated bubble in a troubled sea ... [that] had no impact on troubled political process [and] were virtually ignored by local and international policy makers” (Herzog and Hai, 2005: 9). In recent years the Palestinian Authority and Hamas have publicly opposed all informal meetings between Israelis and Palestinians. Opposition is based on the belief that such meetings represent a form of “normalisation” between Israelis and Palestinians, as well as a feeling that they have no tangible results for Palestinians and are used by Israel for political gains. Yet, in spite of the extreme disillusionment of NGO leaders and peace activists, these activities have not disappeared but continue to operate, gain participants and facilitate movement on the grassroots level.

These encounters mostly followed one of the major models of intergroup encounters: coexistence, joint projects, confrontation, or storytelling (Maoz, 2011) implemented by joint or independent organisations from both communities. Activities were offered to all sectors of society and despite limited funding,¹⁰ data shows that about one in six Israeli Jews has participated in an encounter with Palestinian citizens of Israel (Maoz, 2011:116). Further, most participants from both sides in joint meetings have reported increased levels of empathy and trust for the other side and an increased support for peace (Kahanoff and Shibli, 2012).

Israeli-Palestinian People-to-People activities have encountered numerous obstacles, from lack of institutional support; practical logistical difficulties; political developments, including episodes of

⁹ People-to-People activities is used in this paper as a neutral, generic term which covers a range of Palestinian-Israeli joint projects which have no strict political, commercial or humanitarian agenda.

¹⁰ It is estimated that \$25-25 million was spent on People-to-People in the 1990s in comparison to the EU allocation of £250 million to peace-building and reconstruction efforts in Northern Ireland in 1994 alone (Herzog and Hai, 2005: 31).

increased violence and anti-normalisation discourse;¹¹ and socio-economic asymmetries. Hermann (2004: 53-54) has highlighted how Israelis participating in reconciliation activities were accused of being “unpatriotic” and as neglecting Israel’s security. In both societies, there was a sense that dialogue was “fraternising with the enemy” as it was seen as “according the enemy legitimacy” and possibly “crippling...an ability to fight” (ibid.). Yet, in spite of the challenges of the stalled negotiating process, internal divisions with Palestinian politics, and the criticism, a core group of NGOs have persevered based on the belief that “it won’t stop until [they] talk.”¹² The critical question remains, however, as to whether the micro level transformations can impact the political level?

Conflict Identities Prior to Participation in Reconciliation Activities

Both Israeli and Palestinian participants recounted previously holding perceptions of the other party that reflected demonised and dehumanised stereotypes prior to participating in the reconciliation activities. PCFF participants expressed how they initially associated Jews with violence or being “bad.” Former Building Bridges participant and counsellor, Inas Radwan (2004), highlighted that before she participated in the Building Bridges programme she believed that “the Jews’ only mission is to slaughter people.” Such demonised perceptions present the other party as part of an overarching national stereotype instead of as individuals. These have been reinforced by the very limited or negative contact, if any, with the other party. Founder of Middleway, David Lisbona (2004), highlights that for many of the participants on their programme it is the first time that they have ever spoken to and Arab and that generally Jews and Arabs do not have and “real, social meaningful contact.”

Transformational joint reconciliation activities

The survey respondents and interviewees had all been involved in some capacity with joint reconciliation activities designed to move beyond superficial exposure and challenge entrenched attitudes in line with Allport’s contact hypothesis. These all provided opportunities for exposure with other parties, facilitated empathy, and space to acknowledge humanity and mutual suffering. In some cases the mere sight of people from both sides coming together in peace and compassion is powerful enough to sow the seeds of change (Elhanan, 2006). For others, closer contact is required, such as for Inas Radwan (2004) who found a classroom exchange ineffective, and that it was more sustained exposure through living with Israeli girls that catalysed her change. Co-founder of CfP Raed Hadar (2006) pinpoints his “change and transformation” to when he met Israelis in 2004 at a Sulha (reconciliation)¹³ gathering where he “discovered that there were some Israelis who are very decent and have sincere and balanced.” Therefore, it is not only mere exposure that has an effect but the quality of the interaction or contact that the exposure allows that leads to transformation.

¹¹ Normalisation (tadbiye) is a negative term that encapsulates the belief that if Palestinians participate in dialogue or cooperation projects that are not directly opposing the occupation it represents tacit consent that the occupation has ended and legitimises Israeli actions (Herzog and Hai, 2005:28).

¹² The Bereaved Families Forum, Parents-Circle Family Forum, <http://center.theparentscircle.org>

¹³ The Sulha Peace Project holds monthly “Tribal Fires” that brings together 100-150 Israelis and Palestinians to pray, sing, and eat together as well as participating in learning circles. See http://www.sulha.com/our_programs.

Whilst the effect of empathy as a peace catalyst has recently been contested (Halperin, 2015: 120-139), the development of empathy between parties in intergroup conflict has been viewed as fundamental to reversing stereotypes and rehumanising the other party (cf. Pettigrew, 1998). Telling one's story and hearing stories of others can be an important part of developing cognitive empathy or perspective-taking. For many participants, the turning point comes with the realisation that they have been heard and understood. A PCFF participant who had previously resisted attending any type of joint meeting found her turning point when she participated in a joint dialogue meeting and realised that she had "touched them [the Israelis]" and consequently her "natural animosity evaporated" (A Ja'affari, 2011). The realisation that someone that is perceived as the "enemy" and perhaps had wanted to kill you is now listening is extraordinarily powerful.

However, contact or being heard does not always facilitate empathy. In some contexts, the greater challenge is to be able to listen. Building Bridges participant Inas Radwan (2004) recounts that initially she went to joint activities to be able to talk about her own pain but through reluctantly having to listen realised "that they were saying the same things only from a different perspective." Many of the participants in such activities cite the recognition and mutual understanding of the other's suffering as being the key turning point. Lisbona (2004) highlights that one of the central problems in the conflict is the complete immersion of each side in its own victimhood and inability to "connect to the feelings of the people on the other side." The mutual acknowledgment of suffering is a common theme and clearly articulated throughout the interviews. Activist George Sa'adeh (2005) highlighted that through the meeting of the Bereaved Families Forum he now has "an idea about how the Israeli families suffer and they got an idea about what we suffer and go through." This indicates the need to ensure that in order to facilitate empathy with transformational potential, activities should be structured to move beyond mere socialisation and ensure that both sides have the opportunity to listen, speak, and gain a mutual understanding of each other's suffering.

Individual identity transformation

If one of the central components of reconciliation is for new attitudes to be internalised (Kelman, 2007), the long-term impact of joint reconciliation activities is dependent on whether they actually catalyse a change in the participants' identity. At the heart of this change lies the development of a more multi-dimensional image of the other party and a changed attitude towards the maintenance of the conflict. Participants in the Centre for Emerging Future's GVS gatherings reported that the meetings afforded them the opportunity to "see that they are not so scary as we thought and in fact are human just like us."¹⁴

A significant step in breaking a stereotype and according another their humanity is separating the individual from the group and challenging normative beliefs about the responsibility of the group for individual acts. As another former participant and now PCFF advocate recalls, he began to question, "Am I supposed to revenge or hate the whole Jewish nation because of what one Jew did?" (Abu Sarah, 2005). This mutual acknowledgment of the other's nationhood and humanity that is at the heart of the Kelman paradigm (Kelman, 2008: 24) is reflected in the statement of a

¹⁴ Centre for Emerging Futures. See https://sites.google.com/site/cefmeep/home/activities_en

former prisoner who did not believe in peace expressed that “the biggest change [she] has undergone is that [she] no longer has any desire whatsoever to avenge” and that they must act to prevent the suffering of future generations” (Al-Ja’affari, 2011). In some cases the change is more limited. One participant felt that he had achieved something that he was not able to achieve with rock throwing, and expressed that he would agree to a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders - - completely new to him, a change that he attributes directly to the meetings (Mukbal, 2011).

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the Israeli-Palestinian interview collection

	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
Israeli	75	63%
Palestinian	42	35%
Israeli Arab/Palestinian citizen of Israel	2	2%
Male	71	60%
Female	47	40%
Attributed transformation to participation in a reconciliation activity	38	32%
Ongoing involvement in reconciliation activity post participation in a reconciliation activity.	31	26%
Total number of interviewees	118	100%

In spite of the more limited effects for some an initial glance, the analysis of the interviews (Table 1) confirms that participation has a transformational effect on the identity in the majority of the participants. Similarly, Kahanoff and Shbili (2012), report that on the short-term support for peace among the participants of the narratives project increased by 78%. The Alumni Survey IP reflected a similar trend with 60% of the respondents considering that the activities had changed their attitudes and created new *shared aspirations* towards the conflict. As seen in many of the other studies, this confirms the general conclusions that if reconciliation activities are evaluated on an individual level they can be deemed successful. However, if the success of reconciliation activities is measured on the basis of its role in a more societal wider transformation, or creating *shared aspirations* in this issue’s framework, the impact appears more limited. Whilst both stages are vital in bringing about a more holistic reconciliation, a question remains as to what is required for the individual level transformations to affect the societal level?

Pathways from individual to societal transformation

Whilst there may often be admiration for individual participation in activities, encouraging more widespread participation can be challenging. Activist David Lisbona (2004) noted that the common reaction is “good you’re doing it but I’d never get involved myself.” He noted that even

his own partner is in favour of improving internal Jewish-Arab relations but does not feel that relations with the Palestinians is their responsibility. Continued support for peaceful approaches for the conflict can be challenging for former participants and activists in that they often feel as if they are straddling two worlds – “being on both sides or feeling both sides is a much more complicated situation than being more comfortable in a black and white world” (Lisbona, 2004).

Whilst many acknowledge the need to involve the mainstream elements of society, those who have been involved in reconciliation activities acknowledge the challenges in changing viewpoints at the societal level – “it’s difficult to make major changes in the way one looks at the world and in the same way it’s difficult for an individual it’s equally difficult for a society” (Lisbona, 2004). Therefore, the question remains whether individual change can have any wider impact. In the following section, I set out the final stage of the process: pathways by which reconciliation activities lead to the development of peace constituencies through spin-off activities, political activism, based on new norms that can have the potential to impact on the meso-level.

a) Shift in Conflict Norms

One of the pathways by which reconciliation activities can trickle-up to impact the wider societal level is through individual transformation leading to normative shifts in the sense of vulnerability or existential fear and attitudes to use of violence as a form of resolution. Attributing the reduction of violence on a national level to increased participation in these activities is complex. However, when a Palestinian government appointed mayor begins holding meetings between Israelis and Palestinians in his own home and consequently begins to believe in non-violence (Sabarna, 2011), there is a glimpse of the possibility of the effect of contact on the reduction of violence. Similarly, when participants in contact activities subsequently train checkpoint soldiers in “humane checkpoint conduct” resulting in it being one of the quietest periods in that area (Cohen, 2011), the contact activity becomes part of the process of reducing the norm of use violence.

Many of the participants demonstrated this shift in conflict norms through wanting “to use the law and not weapons to fight the enemy” (Musa, 2010). CfP is founded on the principle of non-violence, with its Palestinian members eschewing violent activity of any kind, and Israeli members refusing to serve in the Occupied Territories (Kallai, 2011). The ability to resist provocation to violence can be most clearly seen with Bassam Aramim, who co-founded the CfP, after a positive interaction with a prison guard whilst he was serving a seven-year sentence for planning an attack on Israeli troops. His commitment to dialogue and non-violence remained firm even after his daughter’s death:

“Abir’s murder could have led me down the easy path of hatred and vengeance, but for me there was no return from dialogue and non-violence. After all, it was one Israeli soldier who shot my daughter, but one hundred former Israeli soldiers who built a garden in her name at the school where she was murdered” (Aramim, 2010).

In some cases, the ability or inclination to resist provocation to violence is more moderate, such as having greater reservations about civilian targets (Mukbal, 2011) or more uncertainty as to their army duties should they conflict with their new belief system (Kallai, 2011). However, there seems to be a greater understanding and empathy towards the civilians and a separation between action against the army or combatants and those against civilians. A CfP member, who served time in

prison for approaching a checkpoint wielding a large knife, expressed how she still “hate[s]” the Israeli Army, however “she doesn’t feel violence towards them anymore,” and that “with ordinary Israeli citizens [she]’ll use non-violence as a way forwards” (Musa, 2010)

Overall, former participants in joint activities seem to share a new resilience to stand firm in the face of criticism or peer questioning. Israelis express being viewed as a traitor (*See* Kalisman 2010; Cohen, 2011) and some have even been thrown out of organisations with which they were involved for organising encounters with “terrorists,” however this did not affect resolve to continue to be involved in such activities (Cohen, 2011). Palestinians express similar incredulity and criticism from their peer group (see Shehadah, 2010; Abu Nssr, 2011) and further have to combat fears of being accused as normalisers, and yet stay committed to the path of non-violence and reconciliation. This suggests that the most successful joint activities will be those that provide a support framework to fill the potential social vacuum that some participants may experience

b) Development of Peace Constituencies

One of the ways of demonstrating the wider impact of participation in joint activities is to look at whether participants established or actively participate in spin-off activities that are designed to foster support for reconciliation programmes or peace processes. Spin-off activities mentioned in the interviews and surveys include social post-reconciliation activity beach picnics leading to the realisation that they hadn’t discussed education and consequently organising a workshop in tolerance and education. (Chaviv, 2011; Abo Saymih, 2011). The Alumni Survey IP reflected that 81% of the alumni are still in contact with participants from the activity they attended, and 38% of the respondents were still in contact with fellow participants from national groups other than their own. Ongoing contact with like-minded individuals from one’s own national group is important in building communities or groups that are committed to peace and compensating for the social vacuum highlighted in the previous section. People are more likely to stay committed to a new norm or belief if they are part of a likeminded group.

The evolution of joint reconciliation activities has led to projects which involve multiple meetings in order to create more sustained contact between participants and friendships in which participants open their homes to each other (Mukbal, 2011). A CfP member, who had been sentenced to 15 years in prison for stabbing an Israeli soldier, established the Abu Sakar Center for Peace after participating in CfP programmes (al-Khatib, 2013). Similarly, Raed Hadar’s encounter with former Israeli soldiers at an Israeli-Palestinian Sulha led to subsequent meetings and ultimately participating in the formation of CfP¹⁵ (Hadar, 2006). Following meeting members of CfP, David Shilo (2011) brought together 30 Israeli disabled war veterans, with Palestinians for joint meetings that subsequently led to the founding of the Wounded Crossing Borders Group.

The PCFF engages many of its members in spin-off activities to great effect. Since its first joint meeting in 1998 they have hosted over 7000 dialogue meetings with more than 200,000 people that are facilitated by former participants.¹⁶ In 2002, following the Second Intifada, their toll-free telephone line to connect Israelis and Palestinians which received over 750,000 calls (Damelin,

¹⁵ *See* Combatants for Peace, <http://cfpeace.org>.

¹⁶ *See* PCFF http://theparentcircle.org/en/pcff-activities_eng/dialogue_meetings_eng/

2005). Similarly, the “Crack in the Wall” Facebook project has 38,021 “likes.”¹⁷ Kahanoff and Shibli’s (2012) short-term impact study revealed that the Parents Circle’s narrative project increased the willingness to be more active in activities supporting peace building by 80%. The Alumni Survey IP, drawing on a smaller pool of former participants, showed that 41% of the respondents indicated that they engage in such work both internally within their own society (66%), and jointly (33%).

c) Peace Constituencies in Action

Whilst it can be argued that all reconciliation activities are aimed at impacting political process, through creating a community of supporters for peace which should trickle up through voting patterns, this is difficult to trace. However, there is evidence that participation in joint reconciliation activities can lead to participation in non-violent activities that are more directly aimed at influencing political process or inducing wider normative change both by the nature of its action and the media attention that it receives. 88% of the respondents to the Alumni Survey IP continued to engage in activities aimed to impact the political level following participation in reconciliation activities. This is similarly reflected in the collection of interviews and personal stories from which 31% were also engaged in ongoing activity designed to impact on the political level.

Some of the organisations that organise dialogue activities also engage members in external activities. CfP has met with ministers and politicians on both sides to try to impact the political scene, as well as organising activities such as assisting in the olive harvest for villages affected by the political situation to demonstrate their solidarity.¹⁸ This organisation, founded by individuals who met at other joint reconciliation activities, describes its role as working “within Israeli society in a way that will hopefully make it elect a government that believes in negotiations and the creation of an independent Palestinian state...” (Hadar, 2006). Similarly, in 2004 when there was a high level of violence, Palestinian members of the PCFF came to Jerusalem to donate blood at the Magen David Adom (Israeli Red Cross) whilst Israeli members crossed enemy lines to donate blood in Ramallah. Alumni of joint activities have become involved with initiatives that are directly aimed at political change such as advocating for framework documents like Ayalon and Nusseibeh’s¹⁹ the People’s Voice draft agreement.

A number of the interviews and former participants highlighted how their initial involvement with a joint activity has led to more political actions. One participant in a CfP joint olive picking activity described how it led him to feel that he must take more action, and consequently he now participates in non-violent demonstrations including those against the expropriation of land for the security fence (Kallai, 2011). Similarly, participation in a joint narratives project for teachers led one participant to become a member of a more politically active group and consequently participating in and organising demonstrations (Sadovsky, 2007). At the more institutional level,

¹⁷ See PCFF Crack in the Wall, <https://www.facebook.com/crackinthewall>.

¹⁸ See Combatants for Peace, <http://cfpeace.org>.

¹⁹ Also known as the Ayalon-Nusseibeh initiative, this document was aimed at encouraging a critical mass of Israelis and Palestinians to sign a declaration of principles between themselves. The aim was to collect 10,000 signatures and it collected 93,000. See <http://www.haaretz.com/ayalon-nusseibeh-launch-people-s-voice-campaign-1.92361>.

the PCFF's Dialogue Programme has been approved by the Israeli Ministry of Education as an approved external programme.²⁰ Whilst it is difficult to measure the size of the impact of these activities on political process, it seems that one person's involvement in a joint reconciliation activity can be translated to action on the social-political level, which points to the potential if these people join together into an active constituency. As Building Bridges alumna and activist Inas Radwan (2004) highlights that Palestine and Israel are small countries, with 500 alumni from the Building Bridges programme alone there could be an impact in elections, and "[if] there were one or two thousand amongst the Palestinians working for peace, it would make a big difference."

In May 2017 a documentary, "The Field"²¹ was released outlining the journey of Ali Abu Awwad (Abu Awwad, 2010), a Palestinian who had been imprisoned for four years for violent action against Israelis and consequently a participant in the Parents Circle following the death of his brother (Maltz, 2017). The documentary charts how in 2014 he dedicated a corner of his own land that borders with settler land as a place for Israelis and Palestinians to meet. The encounters led to a partnership being formed with Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger from the settlement Alon Shvut, who pinpointed his transformation to when he went to one of Abu Awwad's meetings and saw:

"a group of about 20 Palestinians and 20 to 25 Israelis talking to each other there. You have to understand that this is something that never happens. It was the first time I heard someone talk about being in an Israeli jail and about suffering under occupation with no rights. It was giving me a completely different narrative about the land that we live in" (ibid.).

Together they have since founded the organisation Shorashim (Roots) with the aim of increasing understanding and replacing stereotypes based on fear with understanding of each other's humanity.²² Their work ranges from community meetings, work with religious leaders to pre-army academies and at the time of the filming of the documentary over 2500 Israelis and Palestinians have met at "The Field" (Maltz, 2017). It is through instances such as these that we can observe the transfer of individual transformation to the community and society-level, with the public awareness and potential to influence on the wider level.

The Israeli-Palestinian Case in Perspective

There is often a tendency to exceptionalise the Israeli-Palestinian case and it is worthwhile to consider whether the patterns observed in these cases are reflected in similar contexts. The comparative surveys in Bosnia showed similar immediate post-reconciliation activity enthusiasm with 89% of the participants being willing to recommend the programme and 94% of the survey respondents remained in contact with their fellow participants. 75% of the respondents remained in touch with former participants from both their own and other groups, with the activities providing the opportunities for friendship potential (cf. Schroeder & Risen, 2016) as one of the

²⁰ See PCFF http://theparentcircle.org/en/pcf-activities_eng/dialogue_meetings_eng/

²¹ "The Field" premiered at the Tel Aviv International Documentary Film Festival on 14 and 18 May 2017. <http://www.docaviv.co.il/2017-en/films/the-field/>.

²² See Roots <http://www.friendsofroots.net/about-roots.html>.

Bosnian Serb participants highlighted, “great friendships were formed” (BiH Alumni Respondent 744002).

The majority of those surveyed in the Bosnia study (67%) continued to engage in work to bring about more positive change to the conflict situation, as one Bosniak respondent highlighted how his participation in the reconciliation activities had

“motivated [him] to continue to work in [his] own community and to try to motivate people in some way that there will be a better tomorrow.”

The BiH alumni survey revealed that 89% of that continued activity is designed for all communities and the projects’ estimated reach was up to several hundred thousand people. These spin-off programmes cover a range of initiatives including further joint reconciliation activities, transitional justice, work with victims and camp survivors, sports clubs and joint activist networks. The ripple effects of these activities and their potential to create networks of people committed to education, tolerance and seeking interactions demonstrates the positive potential of joint reconciliation programmes. As one Bosnian Croat former camp detainee expressed:

“if I plant one seed, several will grow, that’s how it goes, I believe in people” (BiH Alumni Respondent 746903).

The increased levels of contact and continued engagement in Bosnia, as compared to Israel-Palestine, could be explained by the greater opportunities for inter-group encounters and less physical separation. However, the number of activities aimed at impacting the political level is lower than in the Israeli-Palestinian case with only 17% of spin-off activities in which the respondents were involved being aimed at politicians and national level reconciliation. Such activities aimed at influencing political process were directed at trying to influence legal changes regarding the treatment of detainees and camp survivors as well as transitional justice. A number of respondents highlighted the need to try to effect change to the political establishment. However, there seems to be frustration at not being able to impact the elite level sufficiently, as one Bosnian Serb respondent (BiH Alumni Respondent 742519) commented “people are positive but their hands are tied by the nationalistic parties in power.” Given these difficulties in impacting the political level directly, a number of respondents identified that their spin-off activities focused on empowering young people as the vehicles to eventually bring about social and political change. However, as in Israel-Palestine, the respondents recognise the potential role that they can have in influencing the political level if part of larger peace constituencies, as one Bosnian Serb participant (BiH Alumni Respondent 747156) reiterated:

“We will succeed only by joint forces of the non-governmental sector-civil society, which seem to grow stronger, every day more and more.”

Survey respondents identified additional obstacles to potential trickle-up effects of reconciliation activities, including the election law that favours “nationalistic and fascist actions” and the need to “stop nationalistic provocations made by politicians” (BiH Alumni Respondent 746989). Similarly, a Bosnian Serb participant (BiH Alumni Survey Respondent 742519) echoed these sentiments in highlighting that:

“one needs to remove all the politicians that are in power today – in BiH & Republika Srpska because their work is based on hate, division, nationalism, then everything will be different.”

The Bosnian case also highlighted the way that reconciliation activities do not always impact individuals at the same rate and there can be challenges when people who are at different stages in their identity transformation are brought together. A number of respondents articulated surprise and a certain element of frustration at the way people some participants “still did not face their own past and are locked in their pens” (BiH Alumni Respondent 746903). In this instance, a 67-year old Bosnian Croat who is an active advocate on behalf of wartime detainees expressed surprise at participants from other backgrounds who “still live in the past and are dealing with issues from the past, rather than thinking about the future ways to be creative.” This was echoed by a 47 year old Bosniak respondent (BiH Alumni Respondent 742647) who was similarly surprised at encountering that participants “to this day are not capable of admitting/recognising certain facts” and do not all “accept the necessity of a life together as the only available option for BiH.” This case highlights perhaps another of the practical inadequacies Allport’s contact hypothesis in practice. Organisations often focus more on the number of people that they bring together rather than the stages of identity transformation of the people that they bring together.

The key to defying gravity?

Can making a difference to the conflict identity of individual have a wider impact? Establishing the causality to answer such questions in full is difficult and flawed. Simply knowing that an organisation reaches 25,000 students annually is insufficient to theorise on the impact of the activities. Especially when impact of activities can also be stymied by the ambiguity that emerges from participation in such programmes, public apathy, lack of channels to express opinions that can challenge normative beliefs (Lisbona, 2004) as well as difficulties in maintaining commitment and managing conflicting emotions during times of high political tension.

There is widespread consensus that peace at the diplomatic level needs to be accompanied by peace on the grassroots level. Activities leading to participation in initiatives such as the Geneva Initiative that placed pressure on Ariel Sharon to withdraw from Gaza, demonstrates the potential of active and vocal peace constituencies (Salem, 2006.). As Inas Radwan (2004) emphasises “[t]he solution is not up to the leaders...It’s always the people that make the change. They are the spark.” Yet, as the founder of the IEA highlights that creating this cumulative effect takes time as “you can’t jump to the 5,000th meeting before you hold the first, second, and 17th meetings” (Stolov, 2005). It may be a slow process but creating a critical mass can have an effect as demonstrated by the PCFF and CFP. Measuring the impact of reconciliation activities on the basis of its potential to create this critical mass seems to be a stronger indicator of success than more individualised measures such as friendship potential. This study suggests that the trickle-up effect of individual transformation can be best observed through former participants’ role in building peace constituencies through continued interactions and spin-off activities. Consequently, those designing reconciliation activities should consider the constituency building potential of their activities if they wish to defy gravity.

Even though the study draws on a relatively small sample, it points to some further lessons both as guidance for practitioners and avenues for further research. Whilst the study confirms Allport's contact hypothesis on the individual level, it highlights that its effect can be limited and even destabilising without a support network of others with similar experiences. This would suggest that reconciliation activities need to be more than a transitional programme but provide opportunities for repeated interaction and support. Moreover, the Bosnia case also raises the question of whether contact activities can be productive if the participants are not at similar stages of identity transformation, and whether Allport's recommendation for equal status of parties should be expanded to include equal stage of transformation.

Both in Israel-Palestine and Bosnia, the potential of peace constituencies is severely hindered by lack of institutional support. As Edwards (2009, quoted in Kostovicova & Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2013: 9) highlighted, "civil society alone cannot be depended upon to promote just and effective policy." Until civil society is able to interact better at the leadership level independently, it will not be able to bring about any social or political change and any "trickle-up" effect of reconciliation activity will likely to be limited. Evidencing the nexus between individual and societal level reconciliation is likely to remain a matter of significant debate, and it is the easier to point to its failure rather than its success. However, if in the height of some of the worst regional violence, 300 Israelis and Palestinians can participate in a joint rally urging an end to all rockets and violence,²³ or settlers and Palestinians can continue to meet in a field, the failure is not just that of reconciliation activities but of the leadership to harness, support and encourage these fledgling peace constituencies – "everyone deserves the chance to fly" (Schwartz, 2003).

²³ Post on Combatants for Peace Facebook Page: 19th July 2014: <https://www.facebook.com/c4peace?fref=ts>

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