

The Hague Peace Projects

Year report

2015

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Introduction

The Hague Peace Projects was initiated in May 2014 by four individuals who all have worked before on human rights and peace building, in different capacities. They were very concerned about the many wars going on in the world and the fact that these wars are all too often being seen by the general public as something inevitable, like a fact of nature. Convinced that war is not something natural but instead man-made, they believe that human effort can also be used to try and bring people together in order to stop conflicts and violence. Informing people about the backgrounds and root causes of war is crucial in order to mobilize them to take action.

In 2015 The Hague Peace Projects engaged with a lot of different kinds of actors in the field of human rights and peace building, designed its programs for the years to come and started implementing them.

The programs which The Hague Peace Projects is going to implement these years are: 1. Research and Action, 2. Art and Education and 3. Media and Journalism. In 2015 we have started implementing the first two: Research and Action and Art and Education. A detailed description of all activities within these programs you will find below.

For 2015 we chose four different contexts of conflict as our terrain of work: firstly and most importantly: The Great Lake Region, secondly the Turkish/Kurdish conflict, thirdly the Syrian conflict and fourthly the internal conflicts in Bangladesh. As a strategy of operation within our Research and Action program, we decided to always work in close cooperation with members of the different diaspora's living in Europe, who are coming from these regions of conflict. 'Diaspora' is to be understood in a very broad sense: everyone having his or her background in a certain (conflict) area. This means also second and third generation immigrants could be part of this category when any connection (political, family, identity, personal interest etc.) with this area still exists.

On each of the contexts of interest, The Hague Peace Projects is bringing 'diaspora working groups' together with whom the peace building projects are being implemented. In November 2015 we organized a Diaspora Conference on the Great Lakes Region, an event which involved the diaspora of Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Also several dialogue meetings have been organized with Turkish and Kurdish minorities living in the Netherlands. A research has been started among the Syrian refugees in the Netherlands and arrangements have been made to bring journalists, bloggers and writers from the Bangladesh diaspora together, who have fled extremist violence because of their religious, social or political beliefs.

Please read our annual report of 2015 and look at our aspirations for 2016 and beyond.

1. Research and Education

1 A. The Great Lakes Region

The Great Lakes Region will be one of the priority regions for The Hague Peace Projects in the upcoming years. During 2015 we have invested a lot of time and energy in developing relationships with members of the diaspora coming from this region. We have spoken extensively with people from Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Congo living in The Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe. We have asked them for advice and created analyses together on the conflict in the Great Lake Region and on the potential of the diaspora to contribute to peace. In particular we have organized with them an expert meeting and a two-day conference.

May 27: Expert Meeting on the Great Lakes Region

In the run-up to our Diaspora conference in November, an expert meeting took place on Wednesday, May 27th. During this meeting a selection of representatives of the diasporas from Burundi, Rwanda, Congo and Uganda discussed the proposed themes and goals of the conference.



First of all, the current situation of the conflict Region was evaluated and a short analysis was made about the root causes of conflict in each of the different countries surrounding the Great Lakes. Secondly, the question about the possible role of diaspora communities in Europe and ways in which it could contribute to peace was discussed. The invited experts agreed that, although there is already debate taking place on a small scale in Europe, there is a great need for a platform to meet and exchange views among the different diaspora communities.

The recent history of The Great Lake Region, which is full of violence and suffering, is for many still an open wound. Not only for people living in the region but also for the diaspora

living in the Netherlands. This prevents many people from speaking out. Many issues are still sensitive and a lack of trust between different groups among the diaspora communities prevents a healthy and open debate about the future of the region. The conference can contribute to establish mutual trust and cooperation among people who could become actors for positive change in the region. Increased debate and effective organizing could help to provide decision takers with accurate information, recommendations and initiatives to give a strong impetus to the peace process. The conference aims therefore to provide a free and common space for discussion where the voices of everyone are being heard. Much more use could be made from the knowledge and commitment of the diaspora communities to devise peaceful visions for the region.

November 5-6, Diaspora Conference on the Great Lakes Region

On the 5th and the 6th of November The Hague Peace Projects, in cooperation with the African Diaspora Policy Centre (ADPC) and the Erasmus University Institute of Social Studies (ISS), organized a diaspora conference on the Great Lake Region in Africa, titled: “Root Causes of Conflict and Opportunities for Peace”. During two days, around seventy participants listened to speakers, joined plenary debates and discussed in small working groups. The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the municipality of The Hague and the Haëlla Fund generously supported the event.

The organizers aimed to facilitate the positive and effective contribution of diaspora communities from Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi and DR Congo, living in The Netherlands, to the peace process in their region of origin. By way of open discussion and dialogue, people from different diaspora backgrounds reflected on the context of the conflict in The Great Lake Region.



In the conference set-up we organised smaller expert meetings with people from that region already engaged with the situation of their home countries. Together we discussed how we could make sure the conference would be an inclusive event, where people from different backgrounds could meet and feel safe enough to share their thoughts and experiences. In consultation with these experts but also with ISS and ADPC we designed the final program of a two-days conference, with six keynote speeches, an art workshop and enough space for questions and debate during the panel discussions and working sessions.

The speakers were Jagoda Paukovic (Independent Researcher and Consultant Conflict & Gender), Ben Rutabana (singer, author, activist), Filip Reyntjens (Professor of Law and Politics, University of Antwerp), Dirk-Jan Koch (Special Envoy Natural Resources, The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Joost van Puijenbroek (PAX) and Stéphanie Mbanzendore (Burundian Women for Peace and Development). Jan van der Kolk (Chair of Refugee Committee of the Dutch Council of Churches) was the moderator of the conference.

After the presentations of the working sessions, many of us are convinced of the potential of the Diaspora. There was a clear willingness among participants to continue the discussions. In the future it will be important to focus on becoming a strong group. Some of the attendees of the conference were journalists themselves, so the next time we can think of how our voice can be heard in the media. It is important to show other images. We need places and opportunities like this conference where people can talk freely. This brings us back to the power of the Diaspora and trust building. Trust was mentioned as one of the main obstacles for building up a strong Diaspora group.



The general conclusion was that this meeting offered a unique opportunity to start low profile and base its objectives on trust building and opening to the stories of others. We should learn listening to each other without judging. This approach should be the foundation of all other projects issuing from this conference.

The diaspora has to work together, but peace has to grow and it needs time. We have hope for people to trust each other again. Two days of the conference have shown us that we can have a real connection. Staying in Europe is not only a tragedy, it is also an opportunity to learn, have education and use new insights to help our country as best as we can.

Follow-up of the Conference: Establishing a Diaspora Working Group and developing a Diaspora Programme for Peace in the Great Lake Region.

After the conference in November The Hague Peace Projects has organized several follow-up meetings with participants of the conference and other members of the diaspora. The aim of these meetings was to create a Diaspora Working Group, which has met for the first time in December, and develop a Diaspora Programme for Peace in the Great Lake Region together. We have formulated together our main goals: building trust between diaspora communities by regularly organizing social- and dialogue events, training in peace building and advocacy and creating more awareness by providing relevant information and education through establishing an online platform and online radio station. These objectives have been further developed in a project proposal which The Hague Peace Projects will implement between the start of 2016 and the end of 2018.

1. B. The Turkish-Kurdish Dialogue Initiative

Since the elections of June this year many people have been killed as a result of the violence between the Turkish State and the Kurdish PKK. A bombing of a peace demonstration in Ankara on October 10 killed at least 106 people. The current situation of violence and the deployment of the national army in Eastern Turkey leads also to tensions among the Turkish/Kurdish diaspora living in Europe. In an attempt to de-escalate these tensions, a group of engaged people started an initiative to bring moderate Kurdish and Turkish people in the Netherlands together. The Hague Peace Projects has facilitated these meetings.

Dialogue Meetings

On October 1st, October 23rd and December 16th The Hague Peace Projects facilitated three public meetings to discuss the tensions between Turkish and Kurdish minorities living in the Netherlands. During these meetings the participants shared personal experiences related to the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK, both on the Turkish and on the Kurdish side. Many ordinary people are suffering due to the conflict and even in the Netherlands it has a strong negative effect on both communities. Most of the people who joined the meetings explicitly share a common ideal in favor of peace and against violence. For them this is not an easy message but a statement of courage, because many people are surrounded by family and friends who do not accept any goodwill towards 'the other side'. Starting from the principle "for peace and against violence", the participants have discussed the main causes of conflict, the long history of violence and many cultural and social aspects which prevents an easy solution to this conflict. Finally also many suggestions have been made on how to tackle some of the most persistent problems between the Turkish and Kurdish communities in the Netherlands. Because the number of people living in The Netherlands with either a Turkish or a Kurdish background is quite substantial (around 500.000 people), it was decided to focus any follow-up actions on the Dutch context. Suggestions for activities to be organized together are: organizing dialogue events on schools and in neighborhoods with large numbers of

people from Turkish or Kurdish descent, creating a, organizing debates and public events, writing opinion articles and creating an online platform.



Working group and vision document

From the attendees of these meetings a working group with active members has been formed and hosted by The Hague Peace Projects. The members of this group are willing to put time and energy in organizing some of the abovementioned activities. This working group currently consists of at least eight persons who come together monthly. As a first activity they together wrote a document with a clear analyses of the conflict, a description of the main actors and factors involved and providing a series of solutions. By writing for blogs and newspapers, organizing meetings and engaging politicians, The Hague Peace Projects, together with the working group, want to generate an open dialogue and mobilize the larger Turkish/Kurdish diaspora in The Netherlands to support peaceful solutions.

1 C. Developing a dialogue about Syrian Refugees in the Netherlands

Due to the recent waves of migrants coming from Syria that are entering the European Union, The Hague Peace Projects decided to develop a project aimed to promote integration between both Dutch citizens and migrants and between Syrian migrants themselves. Our aim is to inform and spread knowledge among Dutch citizens and Syrian refugees in order to promote a dialogue which might help to build bridges of understanding. Also we hope to start a dialogue among Syrians themselves who often don't trust each other because of what happened in Syria. Syrians of all ethnic, religious and political backgrounds - who are sometimes each other's enemy in the Syrian conflict - live as refugees together in The Netherlands. This creates tensions.

In order to contribute to an open and truthful dialogue between the Syrian refugees and between the Syrians and the Dutch hosting communities, we want to provide reliable information on who the Syrians are and what the conflict is about. For this reason we are

conducting a research, consisting of a questionnaire and in-depth interviews with Syrian refugees, in order to know more about who they are and what they need. In 2015 we started with this process; we developed the questionnaire, we interviewed many Syrians who were interested in helping us spreading the questionnaire and we visited different refugee shelters in The Netherlands and went to several events for refugees in order to meet Syrian people.

With the results of the research (which we expect mid 2016), we hope to formulate policy recommendations and design a relevant program that caters the need for integration of Syrians in The Netherlands and provides a space for dialogue among themselves and with the Dutch population.

1 D. Support Freethinkers and Independent Voices in Bangladesh

Also for Bangladesh The Hague Peace Projects has started to bring together members of the diaspora living in Europe. This time we are specifically focusing on the journalists, bloggers and writers who have recently fled the country because an upsurge of extremist Islamist violence against 'freethinkers'. Since the publishing of different 'black lists' of all sorts of intelligentsia who are considered an enemy of Islam, these people have been living under constant threat for their lives. The Bangladesh government is reluctant to protect them and does little to persecute the murderers of several of these 'freethinkers'.

During 2015 The Hague Peace Projects has engaged with a substantial number of these 'freethinkers', many of whom currently live in Europe. Together with them The Hague Peace Projects has designed a program for their protection and to facilitate meetings and advocacy for change and dialogue in Bangladesh. This program will be implemented in 2016-2017.

2. Art and Education

Besides the Research and Action Program, The Hague Peace Projects has also started its Art and Education Program. This program is intended to create awareness among a larger public of the causes of war and the things ordinary citizens can do in order to prevent or mitigate conflict.

2.A Art and Peace

'Just Peace' & 'The Fine Art of Peacemaking'

One of the means of doing so, is organizing a two-monthly discussion evening where two worlds come together; the world of art and the world of peace activism. We have called these series of meetings: "The Fine Art of Peacemaking". Although both activists and



many artists are concerned about the world and the society we live in these disciplines hardly ever exchange ideas and discuss their views.

"The Fine Art of Peacemaking" is therefore an opportunity to discuss questions like: What is the connection between art and society? Can an artist be an activist? Etc. Every session we focus on one specific topic; a more global issue or a specific conflict.

Our first event was organised on 21 September, during the "Just Peace Festival" on the UN International Day of Peace. The speakers were Italian video-artist Pierfrancesco Gava and Congolese peace activist Sylvestre Bwira. This evening turned out to be a very interesting discussion on the way powerful people (presidents, the pope etc.) are constructing a 'strong' public image of themselves through elaborately designed propagandist performances on TV (speeches, state visits, funerals, weddings, etc.). One of the conclusions was that the general public implicitly plays an important role in sanctioning the importance of these people by applauding and praising them during these performances.

Our second event of "The Fine Art of Peacemaking" was organised on November 26 and was about Refugees and Migration. Every day we hear about the flows of refugees coming to Europe. But what does it mean to be a refugee? And what does it mean for artists to live in a conflict zone? How does becoming a refugee influence their work? Two Syrian refugees tell their story. The first speaker was Memo Jan, a Syrian refugee from Aleppo. The second speaker was the visual artist



Bassam Alkhouri, who showed us the drawings of his 11 year old Syrian pupil who lives now as a refugee in Turkey.

2.B Peace Education

Alfrink College

The 26th of May, The Hague Peace Projects was invited to speak at several school classes of the bilingual department of the Alfrink College in Zoetermeer, The Netherlands. The school organized a special project week about Conflict and Peace. Sylvestre Bwira and Jakob de Jonge gave a presentation of their work as an NGO that works for peace.

Sylvestre told the students about his experiences as a human rights defender in Eastern Congo, a region torn apart by war since many decades. Also he gave his view on some of the causes of the conflict. According to him one of the big problems is the use of children and young people as fighters. In some areas the actual fighting is done by armies and militias containing as much as 80% children between the ages of 8 and 17 years old. Being poorly educated and easy to influence, they often believe they are fighting for a good cause. They have a lot of energy and aren't always capable of judging what is right or wrong and this energy is often misused by people in high places to fight for them, says Bwira. They do not go to school and will grow up as irresponsible adults, incapable of taking care of the future of Congo.



Another issue Bwira talked about is, what he calls, 'the confiscation of truth'. There is a saying: "the first victim in any war is the truth". This means that people in high places define what is true and what is not. Often denying obvious facts and legitimate alternative viewpoints, these people try to define their personal version of reality as the absolute truth. Therefore the education that students get in the Netherlands, is very important. Because it will learn students methods of how to do research and how to know what is really true and what are lies and propaganda. Establishing the truth about a conflict, answers to questions like 'who are the real actors?', 'what are the reasons for conflict?' and 'who finances the war?' etc, is the first step towards peace.

At some point one of the students asked Sylvestre: 'if you had one minute to get your message to the whole world, what would you say?' He replied: 'I would say to everyone:

disarm yourselves, let your feelings of anger go and start talking to each other'. Sylvestre cited Mandela, who said to the people who asked him to be the president of South Africa: 'I will only be your leader if you stop using your weapons and accept that the only way forward is through discussion and dialogue'.

Documentary: Two lives, one world

Together with the Alfrink College The Hague Peace Projects has also started to make a documentary, putting the lives of two students next to each other: one girl in Zoetermeer and one girl in Goma, Eastern DR Congo.

Two lives, one world is a documentary developed by the journalist and film maker Anneke Verbraeken in cooperation with The Hague Peace Projects, to depict the current conflict situation in Eastern Congo.

The documentary aims to reflect the reality of a school kid from The Netherlands and a school kid from Congo. The intention is to show their routine and their lives in a joyful, humorous, adventurous, high contrasted short film, where the emphasis is not so much on the misery, but more on the people, their expectations, dreams. Human behaviour in a sometimes inhumane context.

The overall objectives of this documentary are to:

- provide training and education in the subjects of conflict prevention, peace building reconciliation and democratic citizenship
- encourage people to develop a culture of peace
- provide a platform for dialogue and entertainment aimed at increasing the openness to others and other communities.

The filming in the Netherlands has started in December 2015 and the film is expected to be complete mid-2016.

Looking forward to 2016

Starting the program and activities of The Hague Peace Projects in 2015 has been both very intense and very rewarding. In one year a great series of activities has been developed, an active team of nine highly educated and very motivated volunteers has been formed and the foundation has been laid for a professional organization in the field of peace building.

2016 will be a year in which currently developed programs will be consolidated through generating sufficient funding, creating a professional work space and starting implementation through collaborations with a wide range of other professional actors.

Besides strengthening the programs around the Great Lake Region, the Turkish/Kurdish conflict, Syrian refugees and the Bangladesh freethinkers, at least two new conflict contexts will be further explored: namely the problem of (muslim)extremism amongst minority youth in the big cities in The Netherlands and mobilizing the Somalian diaspora for peace.

Also some countries in the Great Lake region will get extra attention because of the elections taking place there: Uganda in February 2016 and Congo towards the end of 2016. Around these elections The Hague Peace Projects will organize events in collaboration with members of their respective diaspora's. Also possibilities of working inside Burundi with youth who caught in the current violence will be explored together with partner organizations.

Within the Art and Education Program several big art-and-peace events will be organized throughout the year, called 'The Survivors'. This project is about the Syrian conflict and the drawings of a 10 year old Syrian refugee boy and consists of expositions, workshops, music performances, presentations and debates.

For more detailed information regarding the activities in 2016, The Hague Peace Projects invites you to read its year plan 2016 which will soon be published online.