

Rebuilding societies in post-conflict countries: A peaceworker's personal story

Ian Brightwell's placement has taken him to Bujumbura, where he is working as Policy and Advocacy Officer with the American Friends Service Committee.



My childhood was one that filled me with a spirit of action, a curiosity for foreign cultures and a thirst for engagement in the wider world. I was raised with a sense that many of the best actions are local actions. I think the rule holds true, but I recognize too that there's an essential role for bringing the multitude of local actions together, building momentum and maintaining it through campaigns, networks and social movements.

As an undergraduate student at university I really found my appetite for widespread social engagement. Campaigning and letter-writing with Amnesty I tried to bring close to mind arduous struggles around the world. Human rights laws, child-soldiers, armed violence – these issues seemed so distant in South Wales but I also became active with the Students' Union and got a taste of how deep and wide run the roots of resistance to inequity. I felt fortunate at every opportunity I had to meet, in solidarity, with people for whom a struggle for something better in their lives and their communities was not just the action of the occasional afternoon but the suffering of years of adversity and the commitment of a lifetime.

A degree blending history and politics with study abroad served to whet my appetite for a greater understanding of the difficult paths some people are treading in search of peace, and to try to tread such paths with them myself. However, at the University careers office I didn't see any signs of the sort of "graduate scheme for peace" that I was looking for. I could only see information on being a peacekeeper with the British army or, as a civil servant, promoting peace and commerce but only where it was in the perceived British national interest. I was seeking something rooted more in the needs of people than of states.

I applied to the postgraduate Peace Studies course at Bradford and in the interim set about supplementing bookish learning with the lived experience. Through a few formative months in the Gambia – in the vicinity of so many conflict-affected countries – I shared in the attitudes and endeavours of peacebuilding colleagues with the mindset that, no matter where in the world, peace is not to be taken for granted but must be worked for. It demands self-awareness and action.

Peace Studies and the experience of traveling extensively in Southern Sudan interviewing civil society leaders for a local governance programme bound me to a commitment to return to Africa to work again with inspirational grassroots-level leaders such as I met in Sudan. Having learnt at Bradford about the work of QPSW and the Quakers historically, I was not surprised that the best opportunity I found was through QPSW. For me, the QPSW placements present an opportunity not just to enter the professional peace building sector, but to do it on the best of terms: peace with integrity, through actions grounded in the experiences and the needs of the people.

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